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THE LURE OF BIRD WATCHING

THE LURE OF BIRD WATCHING

by

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'Selworthy and Other Poems'

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NOTE

Of the following chapters 'The Charm of the Woodlark,' 'Birds and Poets,' 'The Pied Fly-catcher' and 'Bird Song' appeared in the *Nineteenth Century and After*; 'The Æsthetic Appeal of Bird Watching' in the *Contemporary Review*; 'The Common Buzzard' in the *Fortnightly Review*; 'Thirst in Young Birds' in *The Field*, and 'Pan Dispossessed' in the *Morning Post*. Portions of other chapters appeared in *Discovery*, the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, the *Morning Post*, the *Daily News*, *The Field*, *Country Life*, the *Bristol Times and Mirror* and the *Western Morning News*. I wish, where necessary, to make the usual acknowledgments to the Editors of these periodicals. The whole matter has been revised and much of it has been re-written.

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E. W. H.

PREFACE

I HAVE called this book 'The Lure of Bird Watching' because it is my experience that the watching of birds in their natural haunts is a pursuit whose fascination increases with the years. It may, and often does owe its origin to quite humble beginnings, such as the robin who sits on the handle of one's spade and picks up the worms exposed by one's labours in the garden, or the sparrows and chaffinches that consume the crumbs left from the breakfast table. It often leads on to the search for rarer birds in less accessible places. Some of us find it engrossing and never-ending; for others, less enthusiastic or with less available leisure, it at any rate enhances interest in the birds which visit the garden or are seen during a country week-end or casual stroll.

Once begun, it is never entirely relinquished, and it is a pleasure which can be enjoyed so long as one can see or hear. Field-glasses, though not necessary for the observation of the more confiding visitors to the bird-table, add enormously to one's pleasure, and are almost essential when watching the wilder and less approachable species.

A fondness for country life, and for the birds which add so much to its charm, has always been a trait in British character from the days of Chaucer and the unknown nature lover who wrote *Summer is*

icumen in. Modern study of bird life in the field may be traced back to the indefatigable labours of Gilbert White; to-day he has numerous followers; many of them have wider knowledge, but none a greater charm. The majority are, perforce, town-dwellers, but, from their compulsory absence, love the country the more.

Though some of what I have recorded may already have been observed, I hope there may be a little which will be new to some of my readers. The simple delights of nature are inexhaustible. No writer on ornithology can tell us all about any bird; each observer, if he has some measure of patience and some faculty for accurate observation, can discover an unexpected piece of individuality which no one else has noted. Custom cannot stale the 'infinite variety' of birds: each little mind is an ego which differs temperamentally, in however small a degree, from the rest. If these chapters can in any measure stimulate others to study nature, and, in particular, birds, more closely and sympathetically, they will have served their purpose.

INTRODUCTION

BY J. C. SQUIRE

THERE are, in our present English civilization, tendencies that one must deplore. There are also tendencies which are elating. It has often been observed (foreign visitors remarked it even in the Middle Ages) that the English are fond of the country and like living in it; the discovery, and early exploitation, of coal and iron was not their fault. The Industrial Revolution came suddenly and could not at once be coped with; but its later consequences are now being fought. The slums are being countered by garden cities and County Council flats; no sooner do the garish petrol-stations invade the villages than a vigorous agitation against them begins; the plague of rural advertisements is in process of mitigation; the possessions of the National Trust greatly increase annually, owing to the widespread desire for the preservation of solitudes; the C.P.R.E. has come into existence and saved the upper reaches of the Thames just when the fate of the lower reaches threatened to overtake them; the massacre of trees has produced a general interest in afforestation; and there has been a change in the national attitude towards our 'Wild Life' just as the richness and variety of our 'Wild Life' was being threatened. The bittern and the bustard we have lost; the fens were drained and the bustard was too large and accessible. The bittern, at least, has come back now that there are bird-sanctuaries in East Anglia, and we shall not, it appears, lose many more. Even with regard to the common birds there is a perceptible change in the public attitude. Village children may still 'pug' nests and stone or torture

nestlings. But wanton slaughter is diminishing; the young egg-collector is gradually being trained to take one egg rather than the whole clutch; birds are protected by law which used to be slaughtered as vermin. A growing respect for bird-life is perceptible, parallel with that feeling for our botanical heritage which leads the B.B.C. to put forward reiterated pleas for a discreeter plucking of wild flowers. Simultaneously, ornithologists have been changing character.

My own bible about birds is Morris's book – six volumes about the birds and three about their nests. The records of rare birds in this admirable work make deplorable reading. This – not an actual, but a typical, entry – may serve as a specimen:

> The Lesser Broad-Billed Chuck may perhaps be classified amongst our British Birds, as three specimens have been recorded in various parts of the country. In 1839 the Rev. R. Jones shot one at Skipton-under-the-Water, Yorks; in 1840 a second specimen (a female in fine plumage) was shot by the Rev. W. Smith at Liskeard, in Cornwall; and last year a male fell to the gun of my friend Archdeacon Robinson in an oak-wood at Bedstead, Surrey.

Records, in those early days, were almost all records of killing. To-day there are a host of observers who watch birds with enthusiastic affection, never kill a bird, and would never dream of killing a rare bird. The modern man who kills a rare bird is not regarded as the hero of an exploit, but as the perpetrator of an unpunishable crime. The collectors, the hoarders of eggs, the stuffers of skins are now a furtive race. The bird-lover now is not a man who shoots a golden oriole, but a man who saves a kestrel as Mr. Hendy saved

one, or one who lies in sedges for hours to photograph shy wild things feeding their gaping young, or one (like Professor Garstang, whose whistling and chattering have recently delighted 'listeners-in') who finds his pleasure in listening to the various strains in the multitudinous chorus of the birds and attempting to register them in some sort of musical and linguistic notation.

Mr. Hendy's is a varied and discursive book, and provokes a somewhat wandering introduction. He says interesting things, for instance, about the distribution of birds. This is a very fascinating and mysterious subject. Hasty observers, because of a decline in some species in their own neighbourhoods, will often announce that the species is becoming rare; in another district, meanwhile, the same birds have been multiplying. The Dartford Warbler is undoubtedly a rare bird; some observers regard it as a very rare bird; yet I know a parish not above forty miles from London where it nests in considerable numbers every spring. When I was a boy in Devonshire I regarded the yellow-hammer as a bird almost as common as the sparrow; its eggs, covered with Arabic inscriptions, were the small change of small boys. So it was until a few years ago in this same parish; yet now it is less common here than the blackcap; in fact, it is hardly ever seen; the reason conjectured by the local bird-authority being the decline in the output of horse-manure. Who can tell what fluctuations have occurred in the raven population of these islands? For myself I have only seen ravens wild on the cliffs of Cornwall; great black things squawking out through the weaving swarms of crying gulls, high above the beaches and the serrated foam-edged rocks on which the shags, black and brownish-grey, stand immobile. Tame ones I have known in Western gardens, as sly as the jackdaw of Rheims; and a

raven has severely bitten me at the Tower of London – the bird it was that died. So striking a bird is the raven that it is very prominent in literature; early-nineteenth-century romantic literature is thick with ravens. But we cannot be sure that a great many authors have not written about ravens who never saw a raven; one suspects that these birds were always few and far between. Not all birds, moreover, are observed. We know how many hoopoes are noted and written about every decade; we cannot be certain as to how many have flown here, bred here, and gone away without ever being seen by anyone who would know a hoopoe from a shrike. Bird-watching is not a universal pastime; and, with the best of glasses and the extreme of patience, it is never an easy one.

Mr. Hendy writes charmingly on 'The Æsthetic Appeal,' and quite properly opens with a reference to Hudson. The loveliest pictures of birds that I know are in Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago*. There is one of a group of flamingoes and other invaders in a still water; and one of a flock of little yellow parakeets settling in a blossom-laden tree. Those scenes were witnessed in the Argentine seventy years ago; there are an infinity of pictures to be drawn even under our more temperate sky. There was once a kingfisher, with a goldfish in his mouth, perched on a leaden cupid who sprayed water into a little ornamental pond . . . but that is hardly typical. Flamingoes and kingfishers are well enough. But there is one glory of the sun and another of the moon. A flock of goldfinches; a pair of nuthatches; a chequered wagtail running and pausing on a lawn; a blue-tit clambering over a coco-nut; a male chaffinch in full panoply; turtle-doves flapping away from a hedge; a crested plover on a stone; a magpie; a jay: these may be seen any morning in any English county, and we need no cockatoos or humming-birds. The

colour of birds' eggs and the structure of birds' nests (most wonderful of all the chaffinch's) are not only to be enjoyed by those who rob the birds. The chemical manufacturers of the world have been labouring for years to produce a colour like that of the thrush's egg: it can be enjoyed, any spring, at the expense of a brief search in any hedge. Many of the commonest eggs – thrush's, sparrow's, starling's, hedge-sparrow's, robin's – are amongst the most beautifully-coloured: and what miracles of delicacy, putting the finest porcelains to shame, are to be found amongst the smaller eggs!

'The Lure of Bird-Watching': the phrase must evoke many memories in any man who is at home in the country. This is not my book: and I cannot recall all mine: but they arise, and I realize how heterogeneous they are, and how far back they extend. Three-quarters of my most vivid recollections of birds were stored up in early youth, long before I ever thought of deliberately going out with field-glasses. I thought I was merely looking for eggs: peering ahead at the hedges as the dog-cart jogged along and the small birds flitted out; parting hollies and diving into gorse-bushes; letting myself down, projection by projection, over cliffs; studiously examining clumps of reeds on the edges of ponds and streams. I did not then know, being intent on the nests, how deeply the impressions of the birds were striking: blue pigeons, gaudy jays, incessantly-screaming gulls, bright-eyed thrushes sitting tenaciously on their nests, hosts of little gaping beaks in a globe of moss, the gay surrounding songs of the unattacked. The eggs were the prize and the collection the goal: at least I never stripped a nest. There, perhaps, lies the secret: *medio tutissimus ibis*. Unchecked, the birds would get out of hand; over-plundered they would be extinguished. An awareness of this probably accounts for the fact that half the most ardent

bird-lovers in England are also eager shots. They will shoot one kind of bird, which is very common or owes its existence to preservation, and they will no more think of shooting another kind than they would think of shooting their brothers and sisters. They will kill jays as poachers and even magpies; but if these 'vermin' (the term is not mine) were to become scarce they would be as indignant at the man who shot one as they now are at a man who shoots a golden eagle (in England) or a chough. The Montagu Harrier is vermin in a sense: he massacres little birds, without a thought of their rarity: but he is uncommon and the law now protects him. I confess that some of my own most intimate experiences with birds have been obtained during shooting expeditions. It was on one of those last year that a friend of mine, surmounting a hedge and suddenly snap-shooting, brought down a night-jar thinking it was a snipe: the mistake was pardonable, and all he said was, 'The damned fool ought to have migrated a month ago!' A day's shooting always brings one surprises. But there is nothing to equal an evening's shooting. Go to a duckpond in wide marshes or moors as twilight falls in November or December. The sun sets, the moon rises; the faint mists begin to gather. You wait for the duck in total silence as the light on the water greys to steel and the barred clouds hang motionless. From a distant wood an owl hoots; unseen snipe drum mysteriously over the heather behind one; a flock of plover flashes momentarily past one's vision. It darkens still; the moon is obscured and it is almost too dark to see. Suddenly, from the direction of the wind, there is a faint whirring. The birds are unseen; there is a little splash and then the ghost of a quack. On such a night, whether one shoots and kills or not, the realization comes over one that this is not merely a world of men, but a world

of animals also who have their own times and places and come and go mysteriously on their own businesses, thinking nothing of us until, with our unheralded explosions, we break into their world as earthquake and lightning break into ours. And not always calamitously; sometimes as a merciful release. Yesterday in the lane I came across a young rook with a damaged trailing wing. He allowed me at last to capture him; yawed at first, then was reconciled to the stroking hand. I could not bear to wring his neck, thicker and tougher than a partridge's: he was on terms with me and, anthropomorphically, I envisaged a sense of betrayal in him, poor sturdy young creature to whom something odd, but (for all he knew) temporary, had happened, and who had been taken up by a kind Providence which did not, apparently, mean to hurt him. I brought him home, shut him in a crate while I put the gun together; let him out to flap across the yard, and then blew him to bits.

I wander, however. I have immensely enjoyed Mr. Hendy's book. He may be destined, like Mr. Henry Williamson, to carry on the succession from Richard Jefferies and Hudson.

TO
H. M. H.

CHAPTER I

THE ÆSTHETIC APPEAL OF BIRD WATCHING

On the stone surrounding the grave of the late W. H. Hudson are inscribed these words: 'He loved birds and green places and the wind on the heath and saw the brightness of the skirts of God.' The inscription could hardly be bettered; one cannot read a page of Hudson without realizing that he had seen the vision, and that its glory still shone in his face. 'The wind on the heath' links him with George Borrow, a kindred spirit who also loved to go afoot in England. The last line, from the American poet Bryant, was quoted by Hudson himself in *Birds and Man*. It echoes Goethe, who called the Cosmos 'the living mantle of God.' And, in that rich and many-hued mantle, birds are, to give them no higher a place, a rare embroidery of colour and song. To some, indeed, they are more than mere embroidery, for the varied beauty of their plumage, the sweetness of their music, and the subtle charm of their insouciant yet complex personalities touch a very deep chord in the æsthetic sense.

The full appreciation of beauty in birds, or elsewhere, is vouchsafed to most of us only at rare moments. Sometimes

> 'Casting the body's vest aside,
> My soul into the boughs does glide;

There, like a bird, it sits and sings,
Then whets and claps its silver wings,
And, till prepared for longer flight,
Waves in its plumes the various light.'

More often, in times of ill-health, or dejection, we, like Coleridge, 'see, not feel, how beautiful they are.' 'To speak truly,' says Emerson, 'few adult persons can see nature. . . . The lover of nature is he . . . who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.' One must have the heart of a child. I still remember, and shall never forget, my first song-thrush's nest; the breathless scramble up a very prickly holly on the edge of a Somerset wood, the touch of the crisp clay lining as my fingers reached over the edge of the nest, the warmth of the eggs from beneath the mother-bird's breast, and the gasp of sheer astonishment and joy at their perfect blue, as they lay in the hollow of my hand. In later life

'When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure';

it is difficult to recapture our 'first fine careless rapture.' The fault – if fault it be – is ours. Nature does not change.

'O Lady! We receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:'

To face p. 22.] [*Photograph* DR. FRANCIS HEATHERLEY.

PEREGRINE FALCON

We let the commonplace crowd out beauty; we become, if we do not watch ourselves, like 'the great atheists . . . which are ever handling holy things, but without feeling; so as they must needs be cauterized in the end.' The cock chaffinch, were he a rarity, would be sought out by bird lovers with infinite labour and pains – until exterminated by the baser sort of collector. But because he is so common we forget 'no chaffinch but implies the cherubim.'

Nevertheless, there are times when beauty will strike through the film of inattentive eye and brain with such poignancy that its image is scorched upon our memory, despite ourselves. One evening, I was passing across a stone bridge over a narrow sheet of water in a fine stretch of parkland. Suddenly, from underneath the bridge, a cock redstart flew out, and hovered amid a swarm of flies. The slanting rays of the setting sun smote on the rich chestnut of his tail, as he hung there suspended, and made the feathers glow like living flame; they struck through and kindled them with glowing light, until this 'Firetail' seemed like a flashing jewel, some giant firefly, suddenly transported here from the fierce sunlight of the tropics. And, below, on the still face of the pool, this jewelled atom was mirrored, faintly, indeed, but yet clear, so that looking at the water, there seemed to be two fireflies hovering. For some ten seconds he hung there, winnowing the cool air of evening, while I watched him with delighted eyes.

One summer I was watching a warbler in a coombe on the borders of Exmoor, when, not five yards away, a cock gold-crest flew down to the edge of a tiny water-trickle, and began to make his toilet. After the bath he sat on a stone and gave himself a thorough preening. As he ruffled up his feathers a shaft of sun caught his gleaming, wet crest, and its red and gold, scintillating in the pure light, burned and glowed until I seemed to be watching not a bird, but some tiny elfin sprite, strayed for a few moments from Titania's revels; surely he had borrowed one of her 'rubies, fairy favours,' and its gold setting too. It was a wonderful moment, and one whose memory returns again and again to gladden me.

These moments of ecstasy are the greatest. 'The hours when the mind is absorbed in beauty,' wrote Jefferies, 'are the only hours when we really live, so that the longer we can stay among these things so much the more is snatched from inevitable Time. . . . This is real life, and all else is illusion, or mere endurance.' We live years in a few minutes of intense emotion; it is then that we attain more nearly to the 'soul-life' for which Jefferies strove and prayed so earnestly.

It is difficult to convey to others the beauty of the sights and sounds that appeal to us in these rare times of exaltation; words never have exactly the same value for all of us; it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that no two persons agree as to the

precise colour of a particular object. The poignant impressions made upon the mind and heart by scenes of outstanding beauty are elusive. Always there is

'One thought, one grace, one wonder, at the least,
Which into words no virtue can digest.'

We have to be content with 'mute thanks and secret ecstasy.'

As regards birds, W. H. Hudson had this rare faculty of description in a greater degree than any writer with whose works I am acquainted. Some one once called him more poet than naturalist, and, perhaps unwittingly, thereby paid him a great compliment. Really, he was both. Many will remember his delightful picture of 'White Duck': 'And on this fairy lake in the midst of the pale green field, its blue surface ruffled by the light wind, floated three or four white ducks; whiter than the sea-gulls, for they were all purest white, with no colour except on their yellow beaks . . . and just then, when I stood to gaze, the sun shone full out after the passing of a light cloud, and flushed the blue pool and floating birds, silvering the ripples and causing the plumage to shine as if with a light of its own. "I have never seen a more beautiful thing!" I exclaimed to myself.' Equally charming is his description of the long-tailed tits he saw by the Avon on a very bright day in February. 'The long deep-red pendent catkins and the little pale birdlings among them in their grey and

rose-coloured plumage, with long graceful tails and minute round, parroty heads; some quietly perched just over the water, others moving about here and there, occasionally suspending themselves back downwards from the slender terminal twigs – the whole mirrored below. That magical effect of water and sunlight gave to the scene a somewhat fairy-like, an almost illusory character.' The description is vivid enough; we seem to see the very birds. Yet hear what he says: 'Such scenes live in their loveliness only for him who has seen and harvested them; they cannot be pictured forth to another by words.'

Sensations are said to be the result of vibrations of the minute particles of the medullary substance of the nerves. But the character of these vibrations in the case of each individual is determined by a variety of circumstances, by temperament, or associations, by quickness of perception, or the reverse, or by one's receptivity at a particular moment. It is practically impossible that a given sound or sight should set up precisely similar vibrations in the nerves of separate entities. 'The light that never was, on sea or land,' may have a very real significance to me, but to my friend, it may suggest a quite different picture, coloured by his own individuality and by the associations which it awakes in his mind.

To select from one's own store of beautiful memories of bird life is difficult. Many field natural-

ists would tell you that the mention of a bird's name calls up at once a dozen beautiful settings. Hudson said that he could, in some cases, think of as many as fifty images of the same species of bird 'as it appeared at some exceptionally favourable moment and was viewed with particular interest and pleasure.' His memory was, of course, extraordinary: he could recall distinctly the songs of over a hundred and fifty South American birds whose songs he had not heard for twenty-six years. When I think of a kingfisher two ideal images rise up in my mind; one is of him flying, on a windy summer day over a field of young corn, on whose emerald surface the impetuous gusts ploughed momentary troughs and gullies of paler light; imagine the joy of his metallic blue, flashed upon such a background! The other is of him darting headlong from beneath a bridge, like a green and cobalt scarab, across a smooth sheet of almost black water, on a still January day. The unexpectedness of this rare vision almost took my breath away, and incidentally added another to the many beautiful bird memories I have gleaned from looking over a bridge.

Quite recently I acquired my most perfect picture of a green woodpecker. I was looking down into a deep coombe when, below me, he came flying. Slanting autumn sunlight caught his golden rump, green shoulders and scarlet crest, and heightened all those striking hues. The sides of the coombe were clothed with golden bracken, and trees whose leaves passed

imperceptibly through every tone and semi-tone of colour from tawny russet to pale yellow; over this golden sea he flew, in undulating flight, rising and falling rhythmically, as though he were a swimmer breasting invisible breakers; and flying, he laughed, as only a green woodpecker can, with a sheer joy of life which echoed all down the valley.

I was walking one June afternoon, some five years ago, in a Cotswold wood, which consisted almost entirely of saplings – ash, hazel and oak – all in the freshest of spring leafiness. Below and among the young trees flourished a thick undergrowth, so that, following a tiny pathway which wound through the copse, I was completely shut in, and could scarcely see more than a few yards on either hand. The afternoon was sultry; I had seen little bird life of unusual interest, and was feeling rather jaded in body and spirit. Suddenly, from a spot some distance in front of me came a low, plaintive whistle 'Heigh – O, heigh – O.' I stopped and listened, and again the sound came, like notes from a wind instrument, played by elfin lips and fingers; and now followed a warbled sequence of soft fluted notes, as though the singer were musing in his melody over old memories. Half wondering whether Pan were still piping in this secret Cotswold glade, I crept noiselessly nearer, till I saw, not Pan, but – a bullfinch. There he sat, quietly preening himself, upon an ash sapling, his breast flushing rose-red against

his jet black cap. He stretched his wings, and with his black hawk-like bill combed out each delicate feather, as though he loved it. And ever and anon he piped, for pure joy. Dappled sunlight filtered through the wavering leaves into the dimness of the woodland alleys; the interplay of light and shade fretted his plain-song piping, and wedded sound and sight in perfect harmony. And then, with a twitter, and a flash of his white rump, he disappeared into the gloom of the thicket. The spell was broken.

I have many delightful memories of goldfinches; this is, perhaps, the best. It was an afternoon in early April, a day of mingled sun and shower. Three goldfinches settled for a few moments on a branch near me, and then, urged by some wayward impulse, swept suddenly away in a chime of musical twitterings. While the recollection of their crimson and gold was still imprinted on my brain, a rainbow spread its arch across a distant background of woods, flushed with the pale pinkish tinge which overspreads them when buds are waiting to burst into leaf. In a hedge on one side, maple branches and twigs, glistening after the last shower, glowed like wet blood, a shade deeper than the red of the rainbow; in the near foreground daffodils blazed, brilliant yellow stars amid vivid green grass, and here and there cherry and crab-apple blossom, shining with rain-drops, added tints ranging from pale rose to deep crimson. The arc of the rainbow was small,

and low down on the horizon; against the woodlands each colour of its iris was deepened and intensified, but, at its apex, its bow almost faded against a sky of a very tender and luminous blue. These varied hues of bird and landscape flashed so vividly upon the senses that the brain was almost dazed with so much beauty. The sight of a goldfinch has often recalled this wonderful scene to my memory.

Here is another *vignette*: A June morning; above, deep blue sky, with a few tiny white clouds floating. In an alcove of pink and white dog-roses and fresh green leaves, a cock cirl-bunting. Bright sunlight smote upon the pale yellow of his breast, and the crimson-red of the line which divides it from the jet black gorget. Perched within his bower, he threw back his head and sang merrily.

Naturally, one sees birds in their greatest beauty at the time of courtship and nesting. For one thing, the season is then at its kindest, and the climatic conditions of bird watching are as ideal as they ever are in our climate. It is a fine sight to see a raven tumble and loop the loop, chortling to himself in his joy after every evolution; but when the watcher is exposed to a biting March north-easter, his interest pales more quickly than it would under kindlier conditions. Memories of the love idylls of birds in early summer crowd upon the mind. Some ten years ago, when walking over a stretch of sand-hills on the Lancashire coast, full of interesting bird life, I was

overtaken by heavy rain. Looking round for shelter, I noticed an old wild-fowler's hide, rather dilapidated, but still fairly weather-proof. I crawled into it. It was only a few yards from the edge of a shallow pool of water, evidently a favourite drinking and bathing spot. Soon a common tern alighted; calling hoarsely, she raised her tail, and first elevated and then depressed her wings almost to the ground. Her calls were answered by her mate from the air, and in a moment he settled beside her with a small silver fish in his beak. Raising her wings again, she ran to him, and with persistent cries begged again and again for the morsel; but he was in no hurry to accede to her entreaties. However, after a decent interval, he yielded up the dainty to her, and a long colloquy of a definitely connubial nature ensued.

I was walking one May morning through a wood in North Wales; the path lay in shadow. As I turned a corner my eye fell upon a fallen tree, lying in a patch of sunshine. At that moment a cock chaffinch alighted, and with spread tail, drooping wings and lowered head ran along the trunk towards a hen. The sun gleamed upon his blue head, crimson flanks and white outer tail-feathers and wing patches; it may have been fancy, but it seemed to me that his passion flamed in and through his very feathers, so that they burned with a lustre of their own, more luminous than the brightness they borrowed from the sunlight.

There is another mind-picture, of an afternoon in May, when the lovers were a pair of great spotted woodpeckers. I sat down, without attempting concealment, where I had a clear view of their nesting hole, but so engrossed were they in each other that they paid no heed to me. They circled round me, in and out of the fresh green beech leaves, with a loud, chiding note, like that of a starling, but hoarser. Only after a long chase did she allow him to capture and mate her. Their happy encounter ended, the male stood a little behind her and advanced his bill towards hers; she, turning her head backwards, with her own bill touched the tip of his. It was as pretty a piece of love-making as one might chance to see in Arcady. Below, a couple of red squirrels were playing and frisking among the beech-boles; the wood throbbed with bird-music – wren, wood-warbler, blackcap, thrush and blackbird – and through and across the scene the two revellers, pranked out in crimson, black and white, flitted and chattered and made love.

Another memory is of a pair of wood-warblers; again it was mid-May, in the early morning. The sun gilded the glistening saffron of beech-leaves fresh unfurled, and its warmth drew woodland scents from the drying compost of earth and leaves underfoot. The nest was near by, and both birds were floating from bough to bough around it. Again and again the cock, a tiny sylph in pale green livery,

sailed with slow and deliberate wing-beats towards the hen; and as he flew he sang, pouring out his shivering cadence, like golden rain; and indeed, was it not thus that Jove wooed Danäe? This scene returns again and again to 'flash upon the inward eye': all conditions were ideal; scent, sight and sound combined to heighten the beauty and imprint its memory upon the mind.

The solicitude of birds for their eggs or young – the mother instinct – often allows the bird lover to observe them at their best, for now they forget themselves. When one considers the apparent indifference of birds to their companions' welfare at other seasons, the self-sacrifice they show at these times is very wonderful. It is true that remarkable instances of friendships among birds, and of attachments formed by them for animals and human beings are recorded. And there is the episode related in *The Life of a Scotch Naturalist*, Thomas Edward, where a party of terns united to carry one of their number, wounded in the wing by a gunshot, out of danger. But such instances are, generally speaking, rare, and we may say that it is only in the breeding season that most birds show any marked affection for their own kind. Anyone who has kept a bird-table knows only too well the envy, malice and uncharitableness which is rife where they congregate. Whether the maternal 'instinct' is only instinct, or whether it is in part 'intelligent' is a complicated question. Psycho-

logists tell us that 'instinct is intelligence become automatic, and intelligence is always tending to become instinct.' Be this as it may, proximity of nest or young, makes a bird careless of its own safety, as photographers, and, unhappily, certain unscrupulous collectors, know only too well. Happily this characteristic is also the opportunity of the harmless collector of bird memories – souvenirs, in the best sense of that much-abused word. The peregrine is the wildest of all falcons; but I have seen her come swooping headlong down to her eggs, in an old raven's nest on the cliff side, as though she were stooping at a pigeon, while I was watching her from a vantage point only twenty yards distant. I have stood for ten minutes only a foot or two from a brooding cirl-bunting, and have even had my intruding finger pecked by a hen chaffinch on her nest.

But, perhaps, the nightjar is the bird which shows the most complete disregard for her own safety when incubating. For two years in succession I watched a bird which laid her eggs on identically the same spot, to the very inch, and her tameness was remarkable. She remained sitting on her two eggs while three of us stood for a quarter of an hour within two yards of her, talking in ordinary tones. Later, when the young were hatched, both she and they maintained complete immobility under similar circumstances. The protective colouration of these weird creatures is almost inconceivable; it has to be seen to

To face p. 34.] [*Photograph* G. H. RAMSBOTTOM.

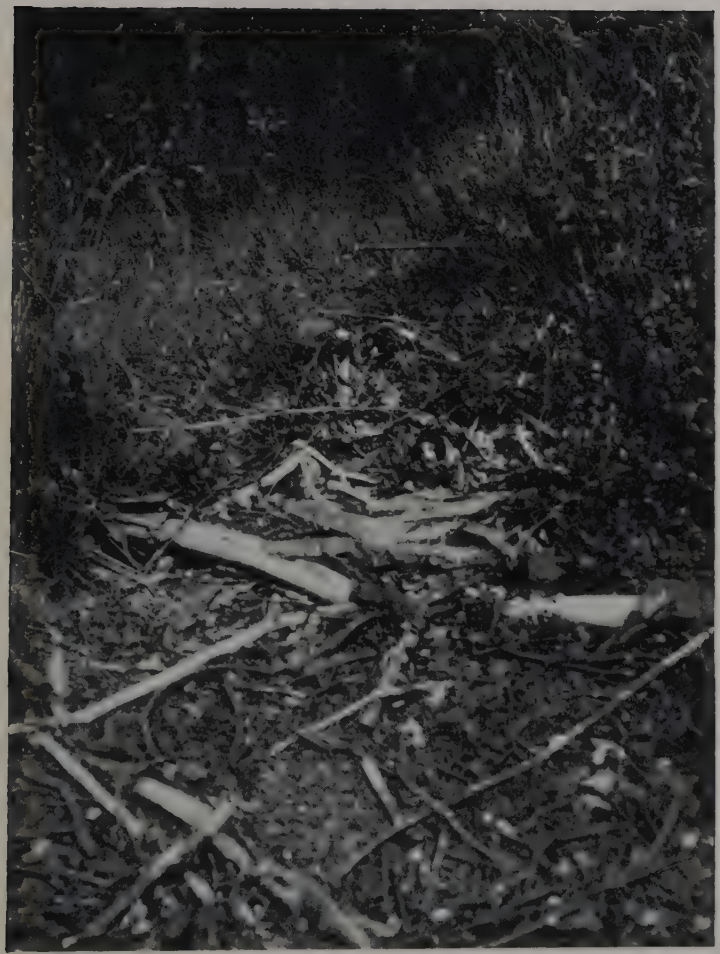
HEN NIGHTJAR AND YOUNG

be appreciated. They lay on a bare patch of peaty ground, covered with a tapestry of dead leaves, lichen sticks, and pieces of bark. With these materials the nightjars, brindled with various shades of brown and black, assimilated so completely that they were almost invisible. They sank into the picture and became as inanimate as withered leaves. Even when the eye discerned them, they seemed like dead husks of birds, embalmed long ages ago, to sleep with some 'Lord Rameses of Egypt' in 'tombs unfathomably deep.' The photographs facing pages 34 and 36 were taken by Mr. G. H. Ramsbottom without any hide or attempt at concealment at a distance of only six or eight feet. They show how marvellously nightjars assimilate with their surroundings. The hen, and the only young one which hatched out the first year we watched them, are lying side by side, facing in opposite directions.

Mr. Edmund Selous has told how, returning to a spot where he had been watching a nightjar sitting, and which he knew like his study table, he failed entirely to see her. He thought he was looking at a piece of fir-bark, and, in fact, looked for the eggs *upon* the bird. I had a similar experience myself when watching another pair. My wife and I crept up stealthily to a clump of gorse, in the midst of which we knew the nightjars usually roosted by day, and peered into it. 'They're not here,' I said, and, as I spoke, the cock flew up almost in my face!

Nightjars are eerie birds to watch; flickering in moth-like flight against a fading sunset of amber and faint emerald, they seem, indeed, disembodied spirits, 'lych-fowl'; but they are even more sinister when viewed at rest. The wide mouth, the flat head, and half-closed chameleon-like eyes, suggest that they retain more of their reptilian ancestry than most birds. This illusion is heightened by their power of moving the pupil backwards so as to watch objects behind them, without moving the head. I once approached from behind a bare patch upon which the hen and two young were lying. They made no movement, but, by a flicker of her eyelids, I could tell that the hen had seen me; it was afternoon, and as she slanted her eyes backwards the sunlight was reflected upon them, and they glowed with an uncanny and malignant fire, which made one think of the evil eye and the basilisk, for her expression was sinister and diabolical in the extreme. If she did not cast a spell upon me, nevertheless she seemed momentarily to do so. It would have been a sin to dissolve so fascinating a *mise en scène*, and I left without disturbing the birds. But as I withdrew, I could still feel that malignant eye upon me.

Curiously enough there is a fish, the dragonet, which I saw for the first time in the Aquarium of the Marine Biological Laboratory at Plymouth, in form, colouring and posture, remarkably like a nightjar. As it lay motionless on the sand at the bottom of the



To face p. 36.] [*Photograph* G. H. RAMSBOTTOM.

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tank, its mottled brown markings, blunt head and tapering tail suggested this bird irresistibly. In certain lights the iris glows a dull red, and this feature, in its eeriness, also recalled the basilisk eye of the nightjar.

Together with this episode goes another in which a bird of a different species, a female red-backed shrike, impressed her malevolent personality upon me. Her nest was in a dense thorn-bush at the top of a steep bank; I caught sight of her when I was at the bottom of it; she was perched near the nest, watching me, her head a little lowered, and her wings a little raised. Her black eye, and the dark line running thence to the ear-coverts, accentuated the forbiddingness of her demeanour. As I advanced slowly up the bank she never budged an inch, but fixed me with her wicked eye, and seemed to scowl. It was remarkable how so small a bird contrived to make herself so menacing. Her feathers positively bristled with concentrated hate. She looked like a small hawk, ready poised to fly in my face; it was not till I was within five yards of her that she retreated.

One of the greatest joys of the bird-lover is his first sight of a species that is new to him; if he be a watcher of the meres it may be that his new 'planet' will literally 'swim into his ken.' My first view of Bewick's swans was upon a Cheshire mere, where they were feeding among mute swans. The little

flock of six was floating on a sheet of water, unruffled by any wind, and so dark that it seemed almost black; the background was a beechwood in its glory of autumn foliage. The dead white of the swans' plumage stood out brilliantly against the swart pool, and their smaller, neater outline as well as the stiff, upright carriage of their necks distinguished the Bewick's at once from their larger companions. With glasses, the lemon-yellow patches at the base of their black bills showed vividly. What struck me most was the quiet grace of their movements; the mute swan is a graceful bird, but beside the slim beauty of the smaller species it appeared almost vulgar.

Another rare bird I saw for the first time in a less attractive environment – on a settling tank in a sewage farm; such places, though unsalubrious to men, are much favoured by wading birds on migration. The spotted or dusky redshank is an uncommon passenger in Great Britain; fortunately this bird, an immature one, was very tame, and allowed me to come quite near him; probably he was fresh from his Lapland birthplace, and had not yet learned what a dangerous animal man is. He was stepping delicately on slim, orange-red legs, probing the black sewage sludge with his long bill; in bright sunlight his back and wings were a glossy chocolate-brown, in which were set symmetrical triangular spots of white. His breast, white, lined with lavender

grey, reflected every ripple of changing light from the water below.

It is fascinating to surmise the story of the migrations of these rare birds. Bewick's swan nests in North-East Russia and Siberia, and winters in Western Europe. It has been seen on migration at Fair Island, midway between the Shetlands and Orkneys, and in the Hebrides. The spotted redshank's summer haunts are in Northern Scandinavia; in winter it repairs to Southern Europe and Africa. When finally my bird took its departure from the sewage farm, it circled upwards in wide irregular ellipses with ringing cries, and then struck out boldly towards the South. The same wonder is aroused every year by the returning migrants; each spring we find them at the same places and at practically the same dates; we duly record their return in our note-books. But what do we know of their experiences? It has been proved that some British swallows pass the winter in South Africa, but we can tell few details of their journey thence and thither, of their escapes from wind and weather, from shotguns and birds of prey. We can only guess how they 'o'er Afric's sands careened,' or how others 'shadowed Arctic snows.' Yet our ignorance is not altogether regrettable; where knowledge is veiled, mystery still lives, and mystery is the mother of romance.

This chapter deals with the æsthetic appeal of

birds, but the author is not blind to the fact that, to many, the scientific aspect of ornithology appeals as much as, or more than the æsthetic. No one can look at a feather, and learn the marvellous and intricate interplay of barbs, barbules, barbicels and hamuli, without acknowledging the debt which bird-lovers owe to the scientist. Knowledge increases appreciation of beauty in a well-balanced mind. It is a question of temperament which face of Nature has the strongest appeal. To Jefferies 'the sun was stronger than science, the hills more than philosophy.' The contest between collectors and protectors splits every Natural History Society. There are fanatics on both sides; if there are black pots, there are also some very dirty kettles. A purely scientific interest in birds may lead to the selfish acquisition of a series of skins and clutches, and to the extinction of rare and interesting species. On the other hand, indiscriminate protection upsets the balance of Nature, and defeats its own ends by increasing the enemies of the very birds it desires to protect.

For my own part, I do not collect, because, to me, it is horrible to destroy or remove from its ideal surroundings a beautiful thing, be it a bird, or its nest, or eggs. A pair of goldcrests flitting to and fro to their young in the fragile cradle rocking quietly beneath a spray of yew, are a delight and a joy. Take them away from their natural environment, and,

however cunning the taxidermist's skill, they are nothing. You cannot recreate the scene in a museum or a collection, any more than you can breathe life into their stuffed skins. A leading ornithologist wrote to me the other day: 'The older I get the more rabid a protector I become.' The author of *Ianto the Fisherman* in later life came to the same conclusion. 'The great difference is that whereas once I thought more of the hidden nest and of a probable addition to my cabinet of eggs than of the sweet woodland music, I have gradually lost my passion for collecting, and now desire only that I might note each habit of the free, joyous creatures among their shady retreats in the garden copse.' It is better to watch and listen, and thus to store up memories in the mind; such collections destroy no beauty, and they are more lasting than faded egg-shells and moth-eaten skins.

CHAPTER II

THE CHARM OF THE WOODLARK

The most recent authorities say that the woodlark is decreasing, and is not found in places where it was formerly known. But in one district of the West of England the converse is the case, for it is certainly commoner there than it was ten or twelve years ago.

When first I heard the song, one bright September morning on the way to a meet of hounds, I was quite at a loss as to the identity of the singer. But for the season, certain notes and phrases in its song would have suggested a nightingale; others resembled the desultory cadence of the tree pipit. I failed then to get a near view of the bird, and it remained a mystery to me, living, as I then was, in a county where it is unknown; twice afterwards, on visits to the West, I heard the song again, but both times under circumstances which forbade my tracking down the songster.

At last, one May morning, I heard once more the unknown yet familiar cadences. We were walking up a deep Devonshire lane, whose high banks were topped with beech hedges; from somewhere on our right, where fields, whose gorsey patches hinted that at no distant period they had been moorland, sloped gently upwards, the elusive, mysterious melody came, but whether from heaven or earth it was

impossible to distinguish. The strain was broken, intermittent. ' 'Tis here! 'Tis here! 'Tis gone!' Now a few notes, faint, far off, like the tiny bells rung by heavy raindrops falling upon water; then silence; and then again, quite near, the throbbing nightingale-like phrase. It was as though some delicate Ariel, in shape unseen, were mocking us. We stretched ourselves at length beneath the sheltering shade of a hedge, and listened. And then at last the riddle answered itself. Above, almost invisible against the dazzling radiance of a May noon, the singer swam into our ken across unfathomable depths of blue sky. The bird could only be a woodlark; the difference between his wide, irregular circles and the spirals of the skylark was obvious. Like his cousin, 'a privacy of glorious light' was his; even when we saw him, our uplifted eyes were momentarily almost blinded. In broad ellipses he made his winged ascent into the empyrean, then glided downwards, and then, with a few swift wing-beats, rose again. Both song and flight were wayward, impulsive; he was 'nature's child, warbling his native wood-notes wild.' A sudden dive to earth ended our Ariel's melody. Carefully we stalked him, and found him quite tame, and not averse to our making his closer acquaintance. We could mark his short tail, pale yellow eye-stripe, continued round the back of the head, his almost black crest, the small black and white mark on the 'shoulder' of the wing, and his

pretty pink legs and feet. His identity was clearly established.

Since then I have had many opportunities of becoming familiar with this delightful bird, for I now live in a district where woodlarks are quite common. They seem to prefer low-lying country, and are rarely seen on open moorland, though both in and out of the breeding season I have come across them in rough pasture bordering the moors at an altitude of one thousand to thirteen hundred and fifty feet. For months they haunted the land round my house, and at length, to my great joy, a pair built a nest in rough grass not many yards from the edge of my lawn.

The lovely song deserves more detailed comment. Both in quality, as well as in the actual notes, it is entirely distinct from that of the skylark, who pours out his

> 'silver chain of sound
> Of many links without a break.'

The woodlark's *vers libres* are more meditative, as though he paused between whiles to take pleasure himself in their beauty. Were his song not so artless, one might hazard the guess that he had studied the technique of metrical pauses to some purpose. The same difference in mood is apparent in the songs of blackbird and thrush; the throstle, like the skylark, has the robustious exuberance of a *prima donna*; both

merle and woodlark are, to my mind, truer artists because they exercise more restraint.

The woodlark's song may be heard in any month of the year. In 1924–5 they went up with a merry noise all through the dismally wet autumn and winter whenever the sun came out of a morning. One bright, warm day in January they sang perpetually, almost without a pause. Perhaps the music reaches its highest perfection in April and early May. At this time, singing as often as not from tree or post, the woodlark's flow of melody may be, for a short period, almost as continuous as the skylark's 'silver chain,' though always more varied. Its finest passage is the phrase, descending chromatically with infinitely small gradations, which recalls to mind a well-known phrase in the nightingale's song; there are, indeed, in the woodlark's, delicate *nuances* of tone-colour, of *piano* and *forte*, which are not, so far as I am aware, attained by any other British songster, except Philomela. These *piano* phrases occur even when the bird is singing from a perch, and thus cannot be due to its nearness to or remoteness from the listener. While singing, the woodlark turns his head from side to side; but, for a bar or two, he will sometimes drop his voice; it is this trick which imparts the contemplative character to certain passages, as though he were singing to himself. And then, again, the sudden silences heighten the listener's expectation. When he is singing in the air these unconscious,

innocent *ruses* clothe the song with that faërie elusiveness, which is so well expressed in the late Father Hopkins' little known poem:

> 'So tiny a trickle of song strain;
> And all round not to be found
> From brier, bough, furrow or green ground
> Before or behind or far or at hand
> Either left either right
> Anywhere in the sunlight.'

He will go on to execute a series of shakes, first on one note and then on another a little higher; this will be followed by a single note often repeated; in fact he improvises on notes pitched now high, now low, in a scale whose infinitesimal modulations are imperceptible even to the musically trained human ear. I have heard the song at night, at dawn, and at dusk; when snow lies thick upon the ground he will still sing, if the sun comes out, or in warm rain when it is cloudy. He will soar into a strong wind, progressing by means of little leaps upward with half-folded wings, and still pour out trills of gusty melody.

To analyse so rare a song may seem almost to be a desecration. But man is endowed, like Mr. Kipling's 'Elephant-child,' with ' 'satiable curiosity.' The song is founded on five distinct phrases or *motifs*. The first consists of a single note, high and clear, repeated rapidly, and often with so much *vibrato* that it becomes nearly a trill; the second is a descending

cadence of infinite modulations; the third is like the nightingale's throb, but sung at a lower pitch. The fourth theme is made up of two often-repeated notes, the first high, the second low, and accented; this phrase is sung at different levels of pitch, and with varying *tempo*. The fifth phrase consists also of two repeated notes, but here the first is low, and the second higher, the first and lower note being slightly accented, but not so much as the low note of the fourth theme; this phrase is usually sung in quicker time than the fourth. Occasionally the high clear repeated note in the first phrase reminds one of the long-drawn plaintive strain in the nightingale's song. It is not always easy, when listening, to distinguish phrase three (the nightingale's 'throb') from the descending cadence of the second *motif*. The third phrase occurs less frequently than the others; the fourth and fifth are used the most often.

Courtship, with its attendant combats, begins early in the year. Owing to the similarity in the appearance of male and female it is difficult to distinguish the sexes. True, the hen is said by one authority to be 'usually smaller, duller in plumage, more flecked, and shorter in the wing.' But it is practically impossible to note these distinctions in the field. At first I thought that I could see a slight difference in the colour of the pair which I had under close observation during the summer of 1924, but I was eventually driven to the conclusion that there was

no real dissimilarity. In some lights the cock looked paler than the hen; in others the reverse was the case; in size they appeared practically the same. This similarity sometimes made it extremely difficult to decide whether a particular piece of behaviour was referable to courtship, or to a preliminary contest between two males. In mid-January, 1924, there was a small party of eight woodlarks on my land. One, evidently a cock, sang from a perch in the hedge, and also gave the call note (usually written 'too-lui-ie') to which one of the others responded with two soft notes, 'wee-ou,' the first slightly higher than the other. I have no doubt that the answering call came from the hen, as later on, when watching a nesting pair, I frequently heard the male's 'too-lui-ie' answered in this manner by the female. The cock then flew down to the ground, bobbing and ducking his head and spreading his tail to display the whitish outer feathers. Nothing further ensued on this occasion, but I believe that this was an early experiment in courtship. February was a cold month, with bitter east wind, but early in March I noticed woodlarks in pairs on our land, the male being in full song.

In April I witnessed a combat between two males which was, I think, a struggle to decide territorial rights, and perhaps also a combat for possession of a female. They were perched on two posts in a fence, which, significantly, turned out later to be the boundary between the territories of two different

pairs. One called 'too-lui-ie,' and the other answered defiantly in song, and then attacked the first one; both of them lowered their heads, slightly raised their wings, spread their tails, and raised their crests. A third woodlark, which I took to be the female, though quite near, seemed indifferent to their rivalry. It was interesting to note that the same attitudes and actions were adopted by the male both in courtship and in fighting. Three times within the ensuing week I witnessed similar struggles. Evidently these excursions and alarums had a happy ending, for two, at any rate, of the parties concerned, for, a week or so later, I saw two woodlarks in the act of pairing. The hen, at the conclusion of a dust-bath, gave a low call, and shivered her wings; the male flew down to her at once. Early in June two adult woodlarks were feeding four fully-fledged young near our house. For weeks I had searched for the nest, but without success. I suspect it was in an adjoining field, but as it was sown with oats I was unable to investigate.

Soon after this it became obvious that there were now two pairs of woodlarks engaged in courtship near our house, the boundary of their respective territories being our fence. As a result, it was sometimes impossible to say which pair one was watching. One was, no doubt, the couple who shortly afterwards nested just off our lawn; the other, I believe, raised a brood in a field some fifty yards away, but,

as it was covered with growing corn, I never found this nest. These courtships were more complete affairs than the preliminary bouts which I had seen in January. I will describe one of them. Both parties perched on posts in our fence a yard or two apart. The cock's passion declared itself in snatches of song mingled with the usual call note, to which the hen replied, sometimes with a low warble, sometimes with a short single note; both birds ducked and bobbed their heads and opened and shut their tail feathers. Gradually the cock came nearer, sharpening his beak on a stump between whiles; but, when he arrived opposite the lady, she attacked him, and both sprang into the air, sparring at each other; they came down in growing oats, which concealed the *dénouement*. Some time later I saw both birds on the ground, facing each other, with heads depressed, but quite motionless. The male does not discontinue these delicate attentions even after he has won his mate; the day after the hen had begun to sit on the nest, I saw the cock fly down near her; she came off the eggs, and both birds began bowing to each other; the male then fluttered in the air over his mate for some seconds, opening and shutting his tail feathers. He afterwards sang to her for some time from an adjacent stump, and the little love passage concluded with a joint dust-bath.

One day in mid-June my wife saw one of the woodlarks carrying nesting material: six days later, I

found a nest with three eggs, in rough grass about a dozen yards from the further end of the lawn, and only about forty yards from our house. Woodlarks certainly have two broods in a season; some allege that they rear three. If the latter statement is correct, then this nest was probably the third effort of the birds whom I had seen feeding young a few weeks previously. The eggs had a whitish background, with greyish-brown spots. The nest was but partly covered with grass and thistles, which afforded very slight concealment. It was built of bents and dead grass, but neither now, nor on careful examination afterwards, could I find the hair lining which is usual. On the south and less open side it was slightly raised. This peculiarity has been noted by other observers; in fact nests have been found with a superstructure of grass and bents which almost amounted to a dome. While the hen was sitting the cock was constantly in attendance; his usual perch was one of the stakes supporting a young crab-apple tree about five yards from the nest; from this vantage point he poured forth frequent song, a challenge to all intruders, and an aubade and serenade to his mate. During this period he almost invariably sang from a perch, but rarely or never in the air.

The couple maintained a constant conversation, whose meaning I was able, partially at any rate, to interpret, by means of patient attention to their various call notes. Besides the well-known call 'too-

lui-ie' (also described as 'tloo-ee-et' and 'tee-i-u') there are several others. The cock from his perch would call 'too-lui-ee' to the hen, and she would answer with 'wee-ou.' My wife interpreted these remarks as 'Two-to-me,' 'me-too.' At first I thought that 'too-lui-ie' was exclusively the male bird's call, and 'wee-ou' the feminine answer, but eventually I heard both birds use each note; 'wee-ou' was sometimes the question, and not the answer; when the young were out of the nest it served, with a preliminary short guttural sound, as an alarm signal to them. It is a call of very beautiful musical quality (as, indeed, all woodlark's notes are, though in varying degrees), with something of a croon in it. Often the cock used 'two-to-me' to call the hen off the nest; usually she responded with 'me-too,' and they both flew off a little distance to feed and take dust-baths together.

Another call note, 'tscheeta-tscheeta,' is not employed as frequently as the others. I think it is either an alarm note, or an ejaculation evincing great emotion. The first time I heard it the cock was, from his actions, evidently in a state of great excitement about something; it was also used once when he was driving the hen back to her domestic duties, and also when both were having a bout of sparring near the nest, but in the mêlée I could not distinguish whether on this occasion it came from one or both birds. There is also another series of notes

which appears to be purely conversational. One evening, after the young were hatched, we saw both the old birds tripping delicately on their small, pink feet down the garden path from the direction of the nest towards the house; as they ran they called continuously to each other, a low, melodious twitter, evidently of a confidential nature. Subsequently, in the autumn, I heard a similar conversation while two birds were feeding together one fine morning, but now the cock was so full of beans and *bonhomie* that he ever and again drew himself up to his full height and broke into snatches of song.

The hen woodlark is an excellent mother. Once she remained off the eggs for three-quarters of an hour, but the sun was shining brightly during the whole of her absence, and evidently she knew that her treasures would not suffer. Usually she was not absent for more than a few minutes. On these occasions she fed ravenously, sometimes from crumbs below our bird-table; she would tear a bit of bread in pieces and gobble them up in a great hurry, sometimes flying back to the nest with a fragment in her beak to consume there at her leisure. When the young were hatched and almost full-fledged she was not so assiduous; once she left them unbrooded in heavy rain; but twice when it was raining she ignored the cock's suggestion that she should come off the eggs to feed. On the other hand, I more than once saw him drive her back to the nest when she had left

it; at any rate, there was first a battle, and then she returned, so that this seems a reasonable explanation. He was a good lover, and a good hater. He defended his territory vigourously. One, and at times both birds of the pair whose territory adjoined our land, occasionally trespassed upon his domain; he at once attacked the interloper with lowered head and spread tail: the contest was continued in the air until the intruder was ejected. One of the most charming traits of this pair of woodlarks was their sociability; they seemed to do everything together. True, there were occasionally small differences of opinion, but they were not sufficient permanently to mar their happiness.

Some authorities state that the incubation period is twelve to thirteen days, but these eggs hatched out on the fifteenth day. I believe that only the hen sits. The cock was in song from his adjacent perch almost continuously while she was sitting, and, though I watched carefully on many occasions, there was no sign of his changing places with his mate. Whenever I saw her leave the nest the cock went off with her and I invariably found the eggs uncovered. I examined the nestlings just after they had emerged. They were partially covered with long, silky down, which, from above, seemed lavender-grey, but closer examination showed that it was really yellowish; there are purplish-blue patches on portions of the skin which make the down appear grey when one is

looking down at it, but this is an optical illusion. There was no sign of the egg-shells in or near the nest. It has been observed that the beaks of young skylarks are not sensitive to touch, as the food is placed by the parents on the tongue. I touched the beaks of the young woodlarks lightly with my pencil-point, but there was no response. It seems, therefore, that woodlarks adopt the same method of feeding. Later I noticed the three curious black spots at the tip and sides of the nestlings' tongues, which are said to guide the parents when introducing food.

The rapid development of the young of birds always fills one with amazement. On the third day the eyes were open, the wing-quills were showing in a greyish sheath, and small feathers were apparent at the top of the spinal tract. On the fifth day the wing feathers were well grown and also those on the head, body and tail. By the eighth day the youngsters were quite lively, and looked as if they might soon be out of the nest; the tail feathers were half an inch long, and the wing and body feathers well developed. If one had not noted from day to day the almost uncanny swiftness of their growth, it would have been difficult to believe that little more than a week ago they were but naked, blind, helpless, sprawling squabs, less than two inches long. On the morning of the thirteenth day they were still in the nest, or rather two were in, but bulging out of it, and the

third was sitting partly on the top of them, and partly on the flattened side of the structure. In the evening they had disappeared, and I could not find any trace of them, but as the old ones were about, the young were probably not far off. It has been stated that the young leave the nest before they can fly, and one observer found that the parents, perhaps in order to discountenance this dangerous precocity, refused to give food except at the nest. But, the day after they had left their birthplace, I put up a young one about thirty yards away from the nest, and he flew quite well; I doubt if this youngster had strayed from home before he could use his wings.

For rather more than a fortnight after this, both old and young were often in evidence in the vicinity of our house and garden. Woodlarks love dust-baths; it was amusing to see them indulge in this salutary pastime *en famille*; they would all, to use a West Country word, 'crump' themselves down with their bodies, heads and bills in the dust, and scrabble up against each other, scuffling round and round, and fluttering their wings in evident enjoyment. They would walk in procession along the paths and across the flower-beds, which were only three or four yards from our windows. While in the nest the parents sometimes fed their tender offspring with currants from our bird-table, and I saw cheese and boiled green peas taken to them from the same source. The authorities state that the young are fed

on diptera and caterpillars; a more varied diet apparently agreed with these, for they thrived amazingly.

There was much of interest in the behaviour of the pair at the nest, and while feeding the young. On occasion, both before and after the brood had hatched, one or both birds would fly directly down to and up from the nest. But usually they would alight a few yards away from its site, and run up to it; there were two runs through the grass distinctly visible by the time the young were ready to leave; the hen on these occasions kept lower down in the herbage than the cock, and this method of progression is also adopted by the fledged young, who can run with rapidity. The cock constantly went to the nest when the hen was sitting, but I could never be sure whether he fed her, though I suspect that he did so. I once saw him offer her food after incubation was over, but it was refused. At first I was doubtful whether the cock assisted the hen in feeding the family, but when the nestlings were a week old, and afterwards, both parents certainly brought food to them. Possibly in the early days the provision of the proper sustenance is too dainty an operation for any but feminine attention. Both birds removed the excreta from the nest.

I have several times wondered whether the female woodlark does not sometimes sing, as well as the male. In describing the courtship above, I have mentioned that the hen responded with a low warble to the song of the cock. Later, when the hen had

come off the nest to feed on crumbs below our windows, I heard her warble a few notes between mouthfuls shortly before she returned. It has lately been ascertained by a patient observer that female robins sometimes sing. Such scanty evidence does not permit one to dogmatize, but the question deserves investigation. Owing to the close resemblance between the sexes the point can only be decided by very careful watching.

Our pair of woodlarks was delightfully tame, and this, of course, made it much easier to watch them. My observations of the young or eggs were always made at times when I had seen the bird leave the nest. I was careful never to frighten her by putting her off it, and kept the grass all round it uncut. Woodlarks had haunted our land ever since the preceding autumn, and before they nested had become accustomed to feed on crumbs spilled from our bird-table by greedy and quarrelsome chaffinches. They were quite accustomed to our presence. The cock would not trouble to move from his adjacent perch when I approached the vicinity of the nest, or was working near by in my garden, and, after the first occasion, they did not seem to resent my examining the nestling young. I only once saw a woodlark remain long on our bird-table. He stayed ten minutes. Perching on the low parapet which surrounds the board, his yellow hind-claw stretched down its whole length, like a long yellow thread, he

ate potato and butter ravenously, but cleaned his bill very carefully afterwards. At the end of his repast he sang a short grace, and retired with a piece of potato, perhaps as a titbit for one of his family. Early in May, 1924, I twice noticed woodlarks pulling off blades of green grass and swallowing them. Possibly there were grubs concealed in the shoots; I at first supposed that they were collecting material for their nest, but I am quite certain that they did not carry the grass away.

The song certainly continued after the young were hatched, but it was not so frequent, nor was its volume so great. It ceased altogether at the end of July, and I did not hear it again until the middle of September; in fact, for about a month from the second week in August, I saw no woodlarks on our land. At this time most of them retire to the cornfields, where I have several times put up small family parties. In 1925 their song ceased on the 22nd of July, and, except for a few notes one day in the third week of August, I did not hear it again till the 7th of September.

In the spring of 1925 woodlarks again nested on our land, and as the site was only some thirty yards from last year's nest, it is highly probable they were the same birds which successfully brought off their brood in the previous summer. As early as January I witnessed combats which may have been connected with courtship, but, as these contests also occurred in the previous November and December,

it is difficult to speak definitely. Their origin may have been territorial, or simply fortuitous, but, as in some instances, while two larks fought, a third remained apparently indifferent, it seems reasonable to refer these differences of opinion to love-making. These battles were sometimes extremely fierce; the combatants hovered in the air with locked beaks, and one could distinctly hear the impact of the blows which they dealt out to each other. Throughout the winter, though I sometimes saw woodlarks in small parties, they were at other times in couples. I suspect strongly that they pair for life, but, owing to the similarity of the sexes, definite proof is extremely difficult.

Be that as it may, on the 17th of March I saw the hen with straw in her beak, and found the beginnings of the nest; about a week earlier I had seen a pair of woodlarks near its site. As merely its outline was as yet sketched out, it is likely that building had only begun that day. Perhaps owing to the very cold weather which prevailed at this time, the construction of the nest proceeded very slowly: it appeared to be finished by the 1st of April; I saw the hen bringing fine bents to it for the last time on that day. It was protected from the sun on the south side by a large tuft of grass. Most of the work was done early in the morning, between the hours of eight and ten. I believe the hen alone is the architect: usually, while she was collecting materials, the cock sang near by, and sometimes displayed to her; I once saw

him pick up a straw, but he dropped it after a few seconds. On the 1st of April I saw them pairing, but this time I did not hear the hen call the cock to her. The first egg was laid on the 3rd of April, and another on each of the two succeeding days: in character the eggs were similar to those in the nest of June, 1924. On the morning of the day when the clutch was completed, I arranged the eggs symmetrically, with the points turned inwards; this disposition did not, however, meet with approval, for in the evening I found them re-arranged irregularly.

Incubation began on the 5th of April, the day the last egg was laid. The mother was quite tame and confiding; she allowed me to look down upon her at a distance of only a couple of yards. Her plumage under these conditions was admirably protective; the light and dark striations on the mantle have a strong similarity to blades of dead grass. Observation of this nest was not easy; throughout the mild winter of 1924–5 the grass had hardly stopped growing; by this time it was five or six inches high, and I had kept it unmown round the site to avoid frightening the birds. The hen usually left the eggs for a short time between eight and nine in the morning, and again about four in the afternoon. The whole clutch was hatched by the morning of the 20th of April, so that, as in the case of last year's nest, the incubation period was fifteen, not thirteen, days. I again noticed that the down, though grey in appear-

ance, is really yellowish; when one looks at the nestlings from above they seem grey, but take one out, and, as it lies in your hand, the yellowish tinge is at once obvious.

On the third morning after hatching I found one of the youngsters dead, a few inches away from the nest. A post-mortem examination of his remains, conducted by Mrs. L. E. Currey, Recorder on the food of birds for the South Western Naturalists Union, revealed no injury; the stomach contained two caterpillars, whose species was unascertainable owing to their partly digested state, and the body was well nourished, so the verdict must be 'death from natural causes,' possibly accelerated by exposure (there had been a cold east wind the preceding day), with a rider that no blame attached to the parents; they evidently fed him well, though perhaps not too wisely. The other two young throve; their eyes were open on the third, and they left the nest on the thirteenth day, thus keeping to the same dates as their probable brothers and sisters of last summer's brood. Again, and on several occasions, I tested the sensitiveness of their beaks to touch, and once even with the offer of a centipede; but as before, there was no response.

In most respects my observations on the nesting habits of these birds agreed with those made the previous year. I was again unable to ascertain whether the cock fed the sitting hen; twice I saw

him go to the nest with a caterpillar while she was brooding, but could not distinguish whether it was consumed by her or by the young. The cock again defended his territory with great vigour, this time against a trespassing tree-pipit; but after the young woodlarks had flown, the tree-pipits nested within the now untenanted area.

Though the woodlark's music probably reaches its highest pitch of beauty in the spring, yet there are times when the autumn song seems, after so long a silence, richer even than the April melody. The throbbing phrase (to which I have alluded above) seems now to recall the nightingale even more vividly than the spring-time song; listening to it again quite recently I felt less surprise at my having wondered whether I was not listening to some late-singing Philomel when I heard the song first. This bird, pranked out in beautifully fresh and clean plumage after his autumn moult, sang almost on end for a quarter of an hour one September morning from a heap of dead grass not more than twenty yards from my bedroom window. I was amazed and thrilled by the wonderful sweetness and endless variety of the song. At this time of year so much melody cannot have any relation to mating, nor, since woodlarks remain in small parties throughout the autumn, can it well be attributed to territorial arrogance. It must surely be pure *joie de vivre*.

What is it that endears one bird to us more than

another? We admire the nightingale not only for its moonlight melodies, but for the romance which poets and lovers have woven around it. We wonder at the peregrine's amazing mastery of the air, and courage in pursuit and attack. The crow tribe intrigue us by their cleverness and spice of devilry. But it is rarely that one gets the opportunity of becoming intimate with any of these birds in a wild state, and it is only under these conditions that one can be sure of knowing the real bird. It is his confidingness that has made the robin the most popular of our English birds, and it is this trait, too, which has now given the woodlark a special niche in my affections; true, his song, which cheers us often when all other birds are silent, makes a special appeal as well, but when one has given attention to a bird almost daily all the year round, and has learned to know him in all his moods, his loves, his hates, his fears, and his feuds, when one has watched with solicitude over his domestic adventures, he becomes a friend. We grow to learn a little, perhaps a very little, of

'The secrets held by creatures nearer than we
To earth . . . and the link of their life with ours;
And where alike we are, unlike where, and the veined
Division, veined parallel, of a blood that flows
In them, in us, from the source by man unattained
Save marks he well what the mystical woods disclose.'

Watching and learning thus, one may avoid the errors both of the dry-as-dust, to whom a bird is nothing but a stuffed mummy in a glass case, or a cured skin in a specimen cabinet, and of the sentimentalist, who attributes to the feathered people his own neurotic sensibilities. The complete nature-lover should endeavour to deserve the epitaph:

'He saw life steadily, and saw it whole.'

CHAPTER III

THE PIED FLYCATCHER

THERE are five species of Flycatcher on the British List. Of these the spotted is by far the commonest and best known. Of the others, the brown has only occurred once, the collared four, and the red-breasted over twenty times in England, and none of them has been known to breed in the British Islands. The pied is a regular summer visitor, but its distribution is curiously uneven. In three or four districts it is common and nests freely. Mr. J. Walpole-Bond (in his *Field Studies of Some Rarer British Birds*) says that he has known over a dozen pairs to breed in one wood, and other observers are lucky enough to have a pair or two patronizing the nesting-boxes in their gardens. But away from such favoured haunts it is somewhat of an adventure to find the nest of this most attractive little bird. One may come across an odd couple, or even a small colony; but even so it does not at all follow that you will find them at home there the next season, or ever again in subsequent years. They seem to be capricious in their likes and dislikes, as, indeed, when one has watched them for long, one would expect them to be, for their erratic flight and inconsequent songs mark them as birds of a volatile temperament.

My acquaintance with pied flycatchers began many years ago in a wood in North Wales. To see

an unknown bird for the first time always sends a thrill down the spine of a nature-lover. It is a lifting of a corner of the veil which hides the unknown. And in this case the thrill was intensified by the fact that I could not at once identify this unfamiliar species: I knew that in some parts of Wales they were present in some numbers, but I was not then aware that they had occurred in that particular piece of country. And added to curiosity was delight at the charm of the bird itself: I was first attracted by a song that was strange to me; then I caught sight of the singer; – he was, of course, the cock. Though not much larger than a marsh or coal tit, and not very dissimilar in general appearance, his spruce black and white plumage marked him out as distinct from either of these. Breast, waistcoat, wing-bars and forehead were of a sleek and shining white which contrasted finely with the glossy black of his other feathers. His song, too, was a far more elaborate affair than anything a tit could ever imagine, and his spasmodic flight suggested at once kinship with his cousin, the spotted flycatcher.

Soon his mate appeared, a dingy, drab little person beside her smart well-groomed spouse; where he was white she seemed powdered with dust of a buffish tinge and his black feathers she had replaced with dull brown. Both were busy carrying food to what was evidently their nesting-hole in a birch about twenty feet from the ground.

Since then I have had many opportunities of becoming better acquainted with the pied flycatcher. He occasionally assumes that humped-up attitude in perching which makes our common flycatcher look so lazy and lethargic, until stirred into galvanic activity in the chase of a fly; yet, being smaller, and neater in build, the pied is a much more sprightly person, and for that reason far more interesting to observe. Few of the plates which one sees in bird books succeed in conveying this sprightliness, and yet it is perhaps the bird's most striking characteristic. As this quality depends chiefly upon its swift and erratic movements, the task is of course one of extreme difficulty for the artist. Yet it has been successfully attempted by Mr. Seaby and Mr. Thorburn. Bewick's woodcuts, as Mr. E. M. Nicholson has pointed out, are usually most vivid and lifelike, but his illustration of the pied flycatcher is a caricature. He depicts the unhappy bird in a crouching position with its beak wide open and its tail slightly raised. Apparently it is intended to be in song, but when the real singer warbles he throws back his head and holds himself upright. On the other hand, when he crouches it is before he launches himself upon his prey, and in that case, as Miss E. L. Turner has observed, the tail is depressed. The reason of Bewick's failure is obvious: he tells us that his cut was made from a stuffed specimen: evidently the taxidermist had never seen the live bird.

And this appears to have been the pathetic case with some of the compilers of other bird books; – at least, so one judges from their reticence. They faithfully copy the general remarks of previous writers, but beyond that are wisely silent.

Both spotted and pied flycatchers feed chiefly on insects, but the pied seems to have a more catholic taste and an especial weakness for ants: formic acid, which at one time I myself absorbed in considerable quantities under doctor's orders, has a distinctly spicy flavour. Certainly the black and white liveried gentleman drops to the ground for his food much more frequently than his sober-suited cousin. Some observers state that he seldom chases flies, but hunts for insects and caterpillars among the trees: it is true that the latter method of foraging is employed (I once saw a pied flycatcher cling to a tree and search for food like a woodpecker), but all the birds which I have watched have invariably hovered and hawked for flies in the air, and in so doing their aerial curvets and caracoles have been equal to any evolutions performed by other members of this family.

Even at rest they are very wide awake: you can see them turning their heads from side to side, with their black eyes ever watchful for prey. The males vary very much in colouring, some showing a good deal of brown on the mantle, which detracts considerably from their smartness; in such a plumage their garb is reminiscent of the rusty old black coats

which confidential clerks sometimes affect in the seclusion of dust-ridden solicitors' offices. Such birds are probably young males in their first summer – though, like Jacques, 'ambitious for a motley coat,' they have not yet attained it; but, despite their dinginess, they sometimes manage to attract mates.

To attempt to describe in words the song of any bird to those who have not heard it is almost always a hopeless business. I have read a good many forlorn hopes of this nature as regards the song of the pied flycatcher, and I cannot say that any of them are convincing. Several observers have noticed the resemblance of certain of its phrases to the notes of the common redstart and the great and coal tits.

My advice to an inquirer would be, 'First catch your flycatcher, then listen to him.' But this is a counsel of perfection to most people. 'Tree, tree, tree, each year I come to thee,' has been suggested, but to my mind it cannot be called more than a poor parody of the original. I have in my notes over a score of attempted sketches in prose of this song, which is indeed a lyric of great charm and elusive beauty: they were all taken down in the open air when the bird was singing. My persevering endeavours to collate these various versions prove the versatility and infinite idiosyncrasies not only of the songs of different singers, but also of the same bird in the space of a few minutes. It would be as impossible as tedious to set out the conclusions in

detail; but a few salient and important points emerge from what at first appeared chaos, without form and void.

The first note has something guttural in its initial sound which is not represented with accuracy by the 'tr' in 'tree': it is more like 'ch' or even 'tch,' and this characteristic is reproduced in some of the phonetic renderings of other writers. Also, it is more usually, though not always, dissyllabic, the first syllable being accented; at other times a sort of intensive 'te' is prefixed, so that it becomes trisyllabic, 'te-cheetle,' or something like it; and this first phrase may be repeated twice, or three or even four times, sometimes in its dissyllabic and sometimes in its monosyllabic form, and in each instance with or without its prefix! This phrase is often, but by no means invariably, followed by a very delightful descending cadenza, but uttered so rapidly that it sounds more like a trill on some very delicate wind instrument; and this trill may be repeated twice. Sometimes there is substituted for it a short warble which recalls a robin's more mellifluous notes. Occasionally one hears the trill twice or three times, but alone, and not preceded by the first *motif* of the song.

Having abused the efforts of others, it is only sportsmanlike to attempt a rendering of the song myself, though at the risk of being subjected to the jeers of my fellow field-naturalists. It is this: 'Tchéetle, tchéetle, tchéetle, díddle-díddle-dée.' I

am painfully aware of its inadequacy, and, as I have explained above, it is liable to all manner of variation according to the caprice and vocal powers of the singer. But it has at least the virtue of having been learned, however faultily, from the throat of the bird itself.

To describe the charm of the song is even more difficult. In all bird music it is the associations which add so much to its beauty. Heard among scenes where Nature is at her wildest – with the wind in her hair and flowers scattered at her feet – where man and his works are no more than trivial incidents in a landscape which, in its essentials, has remained unchanged throughout the course of centuries, – it is the artless beauty of this song which is impressed upon the listener. The bird spills those insouciant jets of melody so carelessly as he flits and swerves in and out of the spring foliage that they seem to express in song the spirit of burgeoning leaf and opening flower; you can hear them singing. One June morning I was listening to a pied fly-catcher in a North Wales woodland. Suddenly there broke upon my ears another strain, in its way quite as perfect. A girl, striding up a winding path to her home in the farm beyond, was singing in a strong, clear treble some Welsh air whose words I could not interpret. But the throbbing pulse of her song needed no speech; joy and pride, love and hope and longing were mingled in it. It rang and echoed

through and among the enaisled trees. Then, perhaps in answer, from a wood on the other side of the valley, a man's voice pealed out; it was a deep and sonorous bass, and in its own mode quite as wonderful as the girl's purer, more lyrical notes. And in and out, above and below, like a descant upon the theme of this duet, there rose and fell the desultory arpeggios and trills of the flycatcher's refrain, – the trickle of some tiny waterfall sparkling in the sunlight and dropping musically into a deep pool. Which part in this amazing trio was the most beautiful one could hardly say, even if one had thought of comparison; but no episode could have contrasted more vividly the artless overflow of song from this little bird and the more sophisticated performances of the human singers. This is my ideal memory of the pied flycatcher's song, and it owes much to its associations.

The courtship is a very pretty piece of play-acting. But it sometimes has its tragedies. The cocks arrive before the hens, and at once begin prospecting for holes which they consider suitable for nesting. Near these holes they sing vociferously; but, alas, they sometimes fail to attract a mate. Of five cocks which I had under pretty constant observation during one summer only two appeared to find the right lady, and of the rest two failed to attract even temporarily any lady at all. The fifth was an unsuccessful suitor; when first I came across him he was busy going in and out of a hole which to him, and indeed to me,

seemed ideal: soon she whom he hoped to persuade to share this desirable residence appeared. His deportment was perfect; he flew to the entrance, looked in, and then retired to make way for her. After some maidenly hesitation she took the hint, and went inside; he followed her; what happened next I cannot say, but I imagined him pointing out with pride the advantages of the site for a perfect honeymoon. Perhaps her attitude was too critical, for after a few seconds they both emerged, and he chased her as she flew off. Not long after he returned to the same tree, but I did not see her again that day. It looked ominous, but I hoped for the best.

Four days later I found him still singing optimistically at the door. Soon she came, too, and perched upon a branch near: he again showed her the way in and tempted her to follow with a charming song of welcome, and a lavish display of his splendid white waistcoat. These cumulative attractions succeeded nearly – but not quite; she got as far as the doorstep, but then feminine perversity – or shall I say caprice – supervened. She flew away in chase of a fly, and though she showed some signs of relenting she did not return again.

I fear that all this persistent suitor's efforts were wasted. I paid several other visits to the tree. Once he was there alone still singing, perhaps to keep his spirits up. The next time both birds were in evidence, and the same pantomime was enacted. At

its end another cock put in an appearance, but was at once furiously attacked and driven off; perhaps the fickle lady transferred her affections to the interloper, for as Bacon sagely remarks 'love is ever rewarded either with the reciproque or with an inward and secret contempt,' and after this I saw no more of her. Subsequently three male birds were challenging each other in vociferous rivalry in the near vicinity, but though I spent many hours watching them I could not see that any of them secured a partner. One of these was, no doubt, my unwilling benedict: perhaps he solaced himself with some trite reflection about its being better to have loved and lost. If so it can have been but cold comfort to so whole-hearted a lover.

But let us turn from this story of lost endeavour to a more cheerful scene. It was a May morning, and as Herrick tersely puts it, the lovers had 'wept, and woo'd and plighted troth.' In fact, to speak prosaically, nest-building was in progress, and, as usual in household matters, the woman was doing all the work, though her activities were from time to time impeded by the well-meant attentions of the other sex. When first I caught sight of her she was carrying a straw to the nesting-hole some twenty feet up, in an ash on the edge of a wood. She was a fastidious housewife, for the straw was brought out again and rejected, but she soon returned with another more to her fancy. Her next contribution consisted of a

couple of dead leaves on a stalk, but these furnishings were also ill-adapted for her purpose: she dropped one leaf, caught it in the air as it fell, changed its position in her beak, then dropped both in disgust and gave up the attempt to fit them in as hopeless. Later, she paid frequent visits to the nesting-site, sometimes with bents, sometimes with nothing in her bill.

The cock spent his time singing and generally fussing about. Twice he chased her into the hole; once he hovered in the air over her; another time he descended towards her with wings outspread, like a tree-pipit. On one occasion on her return with nesting material, the hen found him in the hole: this annoyed her intensely: it was bad enough to have him fussing, but to have him getting in her way was altogether too much. She chided him with acerbity, and he crept out of her way looking ludicrously ashamed of himself. A curious and charming love passage followed. When she was about to leave the hole the cock flew towards her, and after hovering in the air, pitched below her – and their beaks touched. Further advances she repelled: like the lady in Mr. Yeats's wistful poem

'She bade him take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree;
But he, being young and foolish, with her would not agree.'

He stood opposite her motionless for some seconds, and then she flew off with him in pursuit.

A Nature-lover cannot spend an hour more profitably than sitting down within sight of a pied flycatcher's nest when the pair are busy feeding their young. In my memory they are associated with mountains, rocky gorges, and the tangled confusion of neglected woodland. Usually the tree which holds their 'procreant cradle' is within sound of running water: I have known only two nests, out of the many I have found, which were not near burbling streams, and even these were not more than half a mile from a river. Seated in such surroundings on a morning in early June when the oaks are in their freshest green foliage, and the sky, blue as the sheet of wild hyacinths at your feet, is a limitless ocean, across which clouds sail like galleons carrying panoplies of snowy sail, with the murmur of wind in the trees and rippling water mingling in delightful harmonies, all the senses are attuned to the fullest enjoyment of beauty. One's thoughts fly back to old Izaac Walton and his 'sweet content' in fields and waters and angling, and recall his tale of how Diogenes at the fair said to his friend, 'Lord, how many things are there in this world of which Diogenes hath no need!' And, as these flycatchers are almost ridiculously tame, the pleasure of intimate observation of their doings adds to one's happiness.

They are, indeed, charmingly confiding: there is

no need to construct a hide or use any sort of concealment. You can sit within ten yards of the tree, and watch them going to and fro to the nest. More than once I have known the hen to catch some insect almost at my elbow, and take it thence direct to her nestlings. The cock is very attentive to his mate not only during courtship but while she is sitting on the eggs: usually there is a dead branch not far from the selected hole, and on this he will pitch with a beakfull and flit down thence to feed her: the same bough serves him as a perch from which to give relief in song to his pent-up emotions when this little attention is over. Later, when the eggs are hatched, and both are bringing food to the nest, the same station is used by them as a resting-place; but the cock has very decided ideas about parental responsibilities. Though presumably unacquainted with Wordsworth's 'Ode to Duty,' he nevertheless lives in the spirit of that poem, for if, as sometimes happens, his mate, having fed her offspring, stays awhile to preen herself on the accustomed bough, he drives her off to get more food. If she 'deferred the task, in smoother walks to stray' he was 'a rod to check the erring and reprove.' In the earlier stages there was some excuse for his correcting her, for he then brought food as frequently as and sometimes even more often than she did: but, alas, it is to be feared that he wearied in well doing, for later on his attention seemed to flag, and he

left the greater part of the work to his helpmeet.

For the first few days after the young are hatched food is supplied at irregular intervals; on these occasions the hen sometimes remains as long as ten minutes in the nesting-place; probably she broods the young, but this seems to cause annoyance to her partner, who, in masculine ignorance, is anxious to overfeed them. As the nestlings grow larger more frequent meals are necessary. One pair, with young some six days old, fed them about every four minutes: ten days later, when the nestlings were on the point of leaving the nest, they were being fed every other minute. But perhaps these were particularly good parents, for another observer records that young hatched nine days previously were fed only twelve times in an hour. The fare supplied is varied: flies of various kinds are provided, and the cock sometimes arrives with bunches so large that his burden might be taken for nesting material. Grubs, green caterpillars, and large moths also form part of the menu. Both birds remove the excrement.

The position chosen for the nest is usually a cavity in a tree, which may either be one due to natural causes or an old woodpecker's hole; sometimes a crevice in a building or stone wall is selected. The height from the ground is subject to considerable variation. Nests have been found only a few feet up, but I have seen two in disused green woodpeckers' holes which were not less than fifty and sixty feet

above ground level. The most usual height in my experience is from fifteen to twenty feet.

So soon as the young have flown both they and their parents mysteriously disappear, and are seldom or never seen again in the vicinity of their nesting-tree. This fact is curious and has recently been the subject of correspondence in an ornithological periodical. One observer once came across a party in July about half a mile from a known breeding-place, and another bird, ringed in June, was found dead in August about a mile away from the site of the nest. But, except for these instances, all the correspondents agreed that the vanishing trick was performed with singular regularity and completeness. My experience is the same. The year in which I had five males and two females under constant observation, all within a district comprising about a couple of miles, although two pairs bred, I saw nothing of either family after the young left the nests in mid-June, and the apparently unmated cock birds were not in evidence after that date.

The most probable explanation seems to be that pied flycatchers at this season are overlooked: the foliage is, of course, thickest in the summer months, and they feed for the most part among the leaves and high up among the tree-tops. The young, who do not leave the nest before they can fly, are very like the dull-coloured hen in plumage, and so easily escape notice, or may be mistaken for any of the

warblers; and the males, who no longer call attention to their presence by song, moult in July or August into feathers which are chiefly brownish and buffish instead of black and white. Thus they are hardly more conspicuous than the other members of their family. Professor Eagle Clarke, writing in his *Studies in Bird Migration* of his observations at Fair Isle, says that 'all the old males have assumed their winter dress ere they appear in the autumn, and I have never seen a bird either at Fair Isle or elsewhere, during my many autumn pilgrimages in search of migrants, which showed the slightest trace of the pied plumage which renders it such a beautiful and conspicuous object in the spring.' And again, recording his autumn observations at the Flannan Isles, he says of pied flycatchers 'all were in the grey dress of autumn.' Though they are recorded in considerable numbers on the coast, and especially the east coast, during the autumn migration, there are very few notes of them inland at that time, and this may be partly due to the fact that on the coast-line they are less concealed by foliage.

The migrations of this little bird are interesting, and in some cases peculiar. Its winter home is northern tropical and equatorial Africa. Its arrival in England takes place from the last week in April to the middle of May, but odd birds have put in an appearance as early as the 26th of March, and one

has been seen as far north as Lancashire by the 3rd of April. There is also a passage migration from the first week in May till the first week in June. As to the route by which it arrives, the western part of the south coast seems to be favoured, and in some years the preference is most marked. Since it is a rare migrant in Devon and Cornwall, though regular in Dorset, it looks as if a fairly short cross-Channel route were preferred; as the old sea-shanty has it, 'from Ushant to Scilly is thirty-five leagues' – a long way for so small a voyager: and yet, strangely enough, some wanderers journey both to and from home by way of Ireland; one was seen at Achill Island, County Mayo, on the west coast in May, 1920. It would seem that this traveller must have lost his way, and yet in November of the next year another turned up in the same county (this date is very late); perhaps it was the same bird. In other western counties it has been noticed in spring, probably *en route* for its breeding-haunt in Wales and farther north, and there is a pretty constant stream of pilgrims along the east coast, but these are probably bound for Scandinavia.

Some intrepid wayfarers have come under notice both in spring and autumn in the Shetland and Orkney Islands and at Fair Isle, which lies between them. Others skirt the Outer Hebrides on their return journey, and there seem to be lines of flight at the same season along the east coast, rather ill-

defined in Scotland and the northern English counties but well authenticated in the more southerly ones, and so on to the Channel Islands. A less crowded line of flight is along the east coast of Ireland and the west coast of England. Truly a wonderful achievement in globe-trotting for a bird whose length is some four and a half inches; but the goldcrest's migrations are almost as wonderful, and his length is a good inch less.

The eggs, of which there are usually from five to eight, are of a very beautiful pale blue. Having said so much, no more is needful: their measurements have been recorded with meticulous detail by those to whom such things are interesting, and, of course, exactness is a scientific necessity. They may be inspected, usually much faded, in museums, and, I am told, in quite unnecessary numbers, in some private collections. For myself I will say frankly, and I know many good field-naturalists share my views, that eggs interest me only in their natural surroundings, which are the nests where they are laid. 'Oology,' as Mr. T. A. Coward has aptly written, 'presents many interesting problems, and some can only be studied by the accumulation of numbers of eggs, even in clutches. But for the majority of those who profess to study Oology the scientific claim is nothing more than a cloak for miserly accumulation.' I entirely agree, and would only add that some of these people, who resemble carrion crows in their

wanton destruction of eggs, could spend their time much more profitably in trying to learn a little about the habits of the birds whose nests they pilfer. At present their knowledge is more often confined to the outside of the egg-shell, but of aught else they are ludicrously ignorant. And their unscrupulous depredations make it impossible to reveal in public the exact locality where birds so local as pied fly-catchers may be found.

Perhaps some who read this chapter may complain that in writing of birds I have adopted too humanistic an attitude. To them I would say that this is not, nor does it profess to be, a scientific treatise. There are many such for those who want them. I have merely attempted as a field-naturalist to give my own impressions, and to convey to others some of the charm of these delightful birds and the pleasure which may be derived from the observation of even a small portion of their little lives, their hopes and fears, their loves and hates. It is only by these means that one can ever learn something of what goes on in their small brains, and what is the personality hidden beneath their feathers. If the language employed seems inapposite when applied to birds, it has been used not because I am not aware that their feelings are more primitive and elemental than ours, but rather because if we are to try and express their feelings at all we can do it only in human terms: otherwise the only way would be to chirp, and have the

result broadcasted to my audience. But I think that there will be some who will appreciate my intention and my meaning: if these random notes give any pleasure and satisfaction to them, I am content.

CHAPTER IV

RAVENS AND PEREGRINES

To-day ravens are to be found only in the wilder and less frequented parts of the British Islands. In times past things were otherwise. Though of late years they have at least maintained, and perhaps enlarged, their nesting range, they were, up to the middle of the last century, far more common than they are now. Under present conditions their nesting-site is usually on some seaboard or inland cliff-face; the presence of 'Raven's Trees' in many parts of the country commemorates the fact that formerly they were also tree-builders; unpersecuted, they would certainly revert to their old habits. In fact, several instances of tree nests have been recorded in England recently, and I myself have seen one. I know well another Raven's Tree, the 'noble beech about ninety feet in height' mentioned by Bishop Stanley in his *Familiar History of Birds*. He relates how one of the pair of ravens – the female – which nested in this tree, was shot when the young were nearly fledged; the surviving parent procured a new mate, whom he brought to the old nest; she proved a cruel stepmother, for she attacked and threw the first family out of their nursery; she must have seemed to them to have a 'damned disinheriting countenance.' Two of them were picked up alive, reared at the rectory, about a

quarter of a mile away, and subsequently pinioned. Even their father's heart was turned against his own offspring, for both old birds would attack the young ravens in their new quarters if they found them unprotected.

Fortunately, if one knows their haunts, it is still possible to observe these noble birds in their wild state. Probably the first news of the raven's presence will be a deep croak; it is usually rendered 'glog,' but, to my ears, at any rate, the labial is hardly audible; the guttural element is what arrests attention; I should describe it as something between a snore and a bark. The note is extraordinarily resonant; it carries an immense distance, being distinctly heard when the bird is flying at a height so great that, but for its distinctive call, its identity would be doubtful. Breaking unawares upon the stillness of moorland spaces, or amid the silences of a lonely mountain pass, its effect is awe-inspiring; it has a *timbre* which is at once human and supernatural, as though some disembodied spirit was forbidding the intruder to violate a sacred place. Reverberating along rock-bound cliffs, from whose distant base the sullen roar of breakers booms incessantly, its effect is not less startling. One can hardly be surprised to find the superstition that the raven's croak presages death still surviving. Only a few years ago an old dame solemnly assured me that she had found by experience, and that recently, that

the belief was a true one. W. H. Hudson, in *The Land's End*, says that the Cornishman aptly interprets this croak as 'corpse, corpse, corpse.'

There is a large variety of other notes. One is a harsh 'arrhk, arrhk,' often used in moments of excitement or alarm, and a deeper or more guttural version of it which sounds like 'co-orkh': this, and also a curious crow-like chuckle, seem to be used as warning signals when young are in the nest. Another cry is a short 'wuk, wuk, wuk,' quickly repeated, which I heard frequently uttered by a raven when driving off a buzzard from the vicinity of the nesting-site: it resembles the quack of a frightened mallard or the bark of a small dog; it is sometimes shortened to 'uk' or intensified to 'kak, kak': when approaching the nest or young it becomes a soft 'cuck, cuck.' Other notes, heard in the winter months, include a hound-like 'wouf,' followed by a low whistle. Yet another well-known call resembles the 'honk' of a Canada goose, or a ventriloquist's imitation of a distant motor-horn. This is sometimes sounded by another raven in reply to the 'glog' croak; possibly it may be the hen's answer to the male, but this is a supposition which requires verification.

Ravens do not wait for spring to begin courtship. In January I have heard one of a pair on the wing utter a crooning cry when approaching the other. About this time either just after dawn, or shortly

before sunset, you may watch him sailing high above you. Suddenly he turns over on his back, careens forward for a space, then rights himself again, and chuckles – 'tootle-oo'; that a bird who is capable of emitting, on other occasions, such awe-inspiring sounds, should descend to a remark which seems banal, may look like bathos. But the explanation perhaps is that, like all the crows, he has a strain of humourous devilment in him. His somersault is an ebullition evoked by varied feelings: it is part love, part exhilaration, and part pure fun; and so his comment on his own aerial acrobatics is, in tone, both tender, boisterous and humourous. Pepys would have called it 'roguish.' In April and May I have heard a raven after 'tumbling' break out into a harsh 'kraa.'

Sometimes, when sailing into a stiff breeze, the somersault is used as a, perhaps involuntary, method of alighting on the ground; turning slightly across the wind, the bird seems to be blown over; at any rate on such an occasion his landing, with sprawling legs and claws, and wing quills fully extended, is anything but graceful. How powerful are the strokes of his great wings I realized one day when I was sitting on the lee side of a rocky escarpment; one raven flew over me at some height, and then, a minute later, another, flying lower, was just above my head before my presence was suspected; so close was he that I could see the 'beard' formed by the

long throat feathers. The whirr of the great wings, as the bird swerved upwards and outwards, was like the flapping of a sail.

The early days of March find ravens busy nest-building; in fact, I have seen them carrying nesting-material as early as February 6th; a pair I watched one spring were carrying sticks and sheep's wool on March 9th. The site chosen was on a cliff-ledge, only a few yards distant from the battered remnants of a previous nest. In moments of relaxation from their constructive labours, they would settle near each other on a grassy slope at the cliff-top, and indulge in a bout of billing – but not cooing; dismal croaks took the place of that. One bird, presumably the female, shivered her wings after pitching near the other. (I have seen her do this later on when the male calls her off the nest to feed her.) They were shy of coming to the nest while I was watching, though I was concealed, and at a considerable distance from it. If one were absent, the other kept a suspicious eye upon me the whole time. The sentinel, on the return of his mate, gave four sharp croaks of warning. Their meaning, 'man, man, man, man,' was obvious; in the midst of her final sweep down to the nest, the returning bird swerved and settled some distance above it; the ensuing conversation I gathered to be uncomplimentary to the human race in general and to me in particular. The watcher varied the monotony of his sentry-go by

soaring into the wind, diving and side-slipping, but even during these evolutions he did not forget my presence; I could see him turning his head to keep his eye upon me, as he flew. At times both birds would sail together, rising and falling above and below each other, and then plane away in widely separated ellipses.

This pair reared a brood of three sturdy young ruffians. When they were near the end of their fledgling period, I could, when standing on the beach below, watch them climb upon the inner margin of the nest, and crane their necks to look at me with black eyes, in which mischief and suspicion were mingled, after the corvine fashion. Though down was still adhering to their breasts, their wing and tail feathers were well-grown; they would stand upon the edge of their cradle, and flap their pinions lustily, a form of exercise which showed that before long they would be abroad with their parents, and learning the playful wickedness which is the badge of all their tribe.

Sometimes the raven's nest, bulky structure though it is, fails to last out the five weeks fledgling period, and falls to pieces before the young are ready to shift for themselves; its disintegration is probably hastened by the scrabblings of its occupants and the buffettings of the spring gales; one nest which I visited a couple of years ago, met with this fate, but the young ravens were, apparently, not at all in-

commoded. They were quite safe on a ledge halfway down a precipice, where they perched, squabbling and squattering, while their parent, whose tattered wing quills argued much hard work in foraging for their voracious appetites, cursed me from the vantage-point of a neighbouring pinnacle. Their huge, hooked beaks gave them, in their sombre livery of black and sooty brown, a semblance of villainy. A nest, which I had under occasional observation last year, met with a similar fate. Visiting the site after a month's interval, I found that it had entirely disappeared. That the agent of its destruction was human, is possible, but, from the inaccessibility of the site, not probable.

The Ravens' taste for carrion is well known. Almost any morning one may see and hear them flying high from their haunts on the cliffs towards the moor; watch a dead sheep, overcome by a March blizzard, and, if properly concealed, you will see a pair or more of these black-coated gentry giving as much of the carcass as they can hold an indecent burial. Of their depredations on weakly lambs I can only speak from hearsay evidence; some years ago I saw a nest in which were huddled the remains of the young, ruthlessly shot in reprisal for their parents' alleged misdeeds in the lambing season; it was a melancholy sight. One may often come across them among the hills feeding on the ground where numberless beetles crawl and tumble helplessly;

To face p. 92.] [*Photograph* DR. FRANCIS HEATHERLEY.

YOUNG RAVEN

such food one does not grudge them. Following on foot the chase of the red-deer I frequently hear the cry of hounds and raven in conjunction. Whether he scents blood, and has hopes of carrion later, I cannot say; it may be so, but when hounds have had their share there are not many 'unconsidered trifles' left over. I have seen ravens feeding on the beach, but too distant for me to ascertain what caused this curious excursion in marine zoology; no doubt the flotsam and jetsam of a tidal shore provides much that would tickle a palate which is never squeamish.

The raven has been termed 'sub-gregarious,' and there are at least two well-authenticated instances of their flocking in large numbers to roost. I have never noticed this habit in the district with which I am acquainted, but I once saw seventeen in the air at once. It was in September, and I was watching a raven soaring in wide circles, as a buzzard loves to do. Soon after, this bird was joined by another; one of them was somersaulting (and here I may add that this performance is not only a courtship antic, for I have seen it in June, September and October). They flew off, but a few minutes later I heard a regular chorus of croaks and 'honks' behind me, and some distance away. Turning round, I saw to my surprise a small flock of ravens soaring at a great height; they were in parties of twos and threes, and one of five, but I distinctly counted seventeen in all. At times the parties separated, at others they approached each

other, toying and dipping and circling: they were all of a size, and I could clearly distinguish the huge beaks, but had I not been able to make out this unmistakable characteristic, their croaks would have made me certain of their identity. These aerial manœuvres were continued for about ten minutes, and then they scattered in different directions. I had previously heard from friends of similar concourses in this district, in one case of twenty and in another of no less than thirty-two, but in neither case was the exact date noted, though the smaller flock was seen some time in the spring.

The peregrine is the most noble of our remaining British falcons; whether in the air or at rest he dominates the landscape. There is a famous cliff path near a popular watering-place; walking here, in summer, I saw one perched motionless on a pinnacle of rock; the cliffs were thronged with picnic parties, but the falcon sat in statuesque immobility, unmoved by the presence of so much noisy humanity. With field-glasses one could see the swift, watchful turns of her head, as she eyed with quick and comprehensive glances the air, the land, and the sea, surging tumultuously round the foot of the cliff two hundred feet below: nothing escaped her; one might imagine that when her gaze fell upon us humans, her glance was one of contempt.

This majestical quality in the peregrine was brought home to me by an incident which occurred

some years ago. I was walking one April day along the shore, at the foot of some high but crumbling cliffs, to see whether a raven's nest, which had been tenanted in previous years, was in use. The nest was only about fifty feet up the cliff, but the rocks above and below were almost perpendicular. As I approached, I could see from the white upon it that it was occupied. Suddenly, a head appeared, then shoulders and body followed; a bird stalked to the edge of the nest, and stood, with lowered neck and wings slightly raised, glaring at me. It was a peregrine – the falcon. She was a splendid creature, and in magnificent plumage. The black patches at the sides of her head set off her white breast, delicately pencilled and freaked with umber and pale brown, and her bright yellow claws. And her eyes! What a consuming fury blazed forth from those small pools of pitch! I moved nearer, and she took to wing, circling above me, a blunt-headed, short-winged bird, winnowing the air with strong, swift wing-beats. Soon she returned to the eyrie, stooping almost perpendicularly for the last twenty feet, as though striking at a quarry, and stood there keening and cursing. Her rage was awe-inspiring. Impotent though her hate was, I felt humbled before it. 'You do it wrong, being so majestical' – the words rose to my lips involuntarily. Who was I – a mere crawling biped – to dare to intrude upon this noble bird, who held air and crag in vassalage? My slightest move-

ment sent her off, and she was absent for ten minutes. On her return, she perched again on the edge of her eyrie, and gave me a complete and exhaustive strafing. The Jackdaw of Rheims was not cursed more comprehensively. In a little while she moved into the nest, and I could see her turning the eggs before she settled down. As she brooded them, her head reached just above the edge of the piled sticks, and I could see and feel her baleful eye fixed upon me.

I paid another visit to the spot three days later. To reach the nest was impossible; the cliffs fell sheer for fifty feet below and thirty feet above, and over that again were steep grass slopes, which clothed the rock but scantily. I doubt if even with a rope the descent from above would have been possible, for you cannot drive a belaying-pin into solid stone. I managed, however, to climb down to a position whence I could nearly see into the nest. The falcon went off at once, swearing heartily, and was joined by the tiercel. Together they circled far out over the sea, but to-day she was very shy of returning. Once she pitched on the nest, but, craning her head round a jutting crag, caught sight of me, and flew off immediately. Fearing to keep her off the eggs for too long, I retired to a more distant vantage-point, and only then did she come back; I saw her go down into the cup of the nest.

This falcon was probably the bird which nested on

the same cliffs a couple of years before. On that occasion the eyrie was a ledge, whose bottom was slightly hollowed; on three sides it was surrounded by slabs of rock, forming a niche, the fourth side lying open to the sea. Above were steep, grassy slopes; below an almost precipitous drop of over a hundred feet, though in places the cliff-side was strewn with screes and boulders. I attempted to approach the eyrie by a flanking movement. I got within twenty feet or so, but found further approach barred by a smooth rock-face with no hand- or foot-hold; the eyrie itself was screened from sight by a jutting buttress. While I was considering what to do next, a stone, dislodged by a rabbit above, whizzed by my ear. It was difficult either to advance or retreat, as there was slithering shale below, and a steep grass gully above. I decided, as it was impossible to reach the eyrie, to climb up the gully to the top of the cliff. I could only get a hold by digging my fingers and toes into the turf, and was not sorry when I emerged to safety. Subsequently I descended to the beach below the eyrie, and from that position watched it every day for nearly a week. The eyesses were still in down, but their feathers were growing fast. At times they would crawl to the edge of the eyrie, flap their wings, and mew plaintively for food.

The falcon was, at first, very wild, and shy of settling at the eyrie while I was watching; she circled

round, screaming hoarsely, but in time got more accustomed to my presence, and pitched at the 'nest,' where she gave vent to her feelings in subdued chiding; but, even after I had been watching her almost continuously for some days, she always screamed nervously whenever I moved. Anything in motion, a sheep, a shepherd's dog, even a scuttering rabbit, had the same effect upon her. Her cry had a more plaintive tone than that of the tiercel; there was maternal solicitude in it as well as anger. She was a far more bulky bird than her mate, and the upper part of her breast had darker markings than his. The tiercel remained on guard, motionless on a pinnacle above the nest, for most of the day, though he occasionally took short flights.

The falcon, apparently, did all the hunting; it was always she who returned with the evening meal, between 4 and 7 p.m., and who gave the youngsters their supper. I could see her come sailing above the cliffs, her heavy flight denoting that she carried a burden. She would perch on a rocky buttress, some thirty or forty yards from the eyrie, and, after cursing me with great verve and wholeheartedness, fly to the 'nest'; there she would break up the already plucked quarry, and stuff gobbets down the maws of the eyesses, who scrabbled over each other, keening and crying for the morsels. She broke up the prey for the young with both beak and claws, and occasionally took food herself while feed-

To face p. 98.] [*Photograph* C. J. KING.

PERERGINE EYESSES

ing them. As they grew older and stronger, some of the eyesses fed themselves without her assistance. After feeding the young, the falcon usually preened herself carefully. She did not think it necessary to cover the young in a smart shower of rain; with their feathers almost grown this would have been a work of supererogation.

Every now and again the youngsters would stand upright on the ledge which formed their day and night nursery, and flap their wings vigorously; no doubt they were practising for the first flight, though perhaps they did not know it. By the time I first saw them they had learnt cleanly habits, and crawled to the outer portion of the ledge to vent their excrement. This habit soon paints a white patch on the rocks below, which plainly reveals the position of the 'nest.' Both old birds took frequent flights from the eyrie; they would wing out over the sea on crescent-shaped wings in wide circles, first a few rapid strokes, and then a glide, bespeaking perfect mastery of and delight in the air which is their element.

Quite near the eyrie a pair of jackdaws was nesting; I was rather surprised at their presence being tolerated. I saw the tiercel stoop at one of them once; there was no damage done; but the furtive, 'thank goodness that's over' way, in which the jackdaws slipped in and out of the nesting-hole, made it pretty obvious that they found their arrogant neighbours not too pleasant. Perhaps the peregrines had an eye

on the jackdaw fledglings in case the food supply should fail. I do not know what premium is quoted at Lloyds on the life of a jackdaw living next door to sudden-death at any moment, but I should imagine it is prohibitive. I had to leave the district at the end of a week. On my return, ten days later, I made a last visit, and saw an eyess fully fledged, perched on a pinnacle near the nest; she was a falcon by her colouring, and I watched her, 'in maiden meditation, fancy-free,' pecking absent-mindedly at a remnant from a former meal.

An old buzzard's nest was chosen for the eyrie which I found another year. I watched the falcon on several occasions; she soon became fairly tame, and I could see her turning the eggs in the nest. I am sorry to say that she was not allowed to bring off her young; visiting the place one evening, I found no bird, and an empty cartridge case suspiciously near the eyrie. It is a scandalous thing that these rare and beautiful birds should not be safe from the attacks of any prowling gunner.

An inland eyrie, in Yorkshire, was placed in a position fairly easy of access. It was on a ledge towards the top of a scar whose face, though crumbling, was decorated here and there with rowan trees, which afforded fairly satisfactory handholds. There was one young bird, some five inches long, partly covered with the white down of the nestling, who cheeped softly as I approached.

The food of the peregrine no doubt varies with the locality. Pigeons, of course, it has killed from the time of Virgil onwards: –

'Quam facile accipiter saxo sacer ales ab alto
Consequitur pennis sublimem in nube columbam,
Comprensamque tenet, pedibusque eviscerat uncis:
Tum cruor et vulsae labuntur ab aethere plumae.'

In those days the peregrine was sacred to Mars, but now, to listen to the diatribes of pigeon fanciers, it would seem that it is their pets which are holy. I quote the following from *The Field* of 5th of February, 1925: 'That a certain number of carrier pigeons annually fall victims to the falcons is admitted on all hands; but from the evidence before us, it appears that the numbers of valuable pigeons destroyed by them have been exaggerated.' In the district which I know best they take a great number of ring-doves, a species which is too common and does considerable damage to crops: on many occasions I have seen tame pigeons fly past an eyrie unmolested. Once I saw a homer pigeon perch unmolested close to an eyrie while the peregrines were there. Field naturalists will readily pardon this fierce and splendid falcon for any raids it may make upon the inhabitants of pigeon lofts, or a too jealously preserved grouse moor. Smaller birds it does not disdain; it kills starlings, and I have seen one unsuccessfully stoop at a swallow, and another fail to strike any among a

flock of chaffinches in my own garden. The clamour aroused by its approach to a gathering of black-headed gulls argues that the peregrine is in ill odour among them; a congregation of green plover scatters in alarm before it, but the wily lapwing is not an easy quarry, and I have seen the raider retire empty-handed from the attack.

Several times I have watched peregrines attack buzzards; but the onslaught was in no case pressed home, and appeared to be merely a piece of devilment; 'old man buzzard' turned on his back, and defended himself with upturned beak and formidable claws; I have seen a kestrel use the like means of defence, but coupled with loud screams, when assailed by an old falcon. An eye-witness, however, told me that he had seen a peregrine kill a buzzard which fell dead into the sea; it is on record that the remains of a bird of this species have been found in a peregrine's eyrie. I have also been told, again by an eye-witness, of a battle royal between peregrines and ravens. Three of the latter attacked a tiercel, who, against such unequal numbers, was severely tried. But the supports were at hand; her ladyship, whose battle-cry could be heard in the distance long before she was visible, arrived in the nick of time, and turned defeat into victory, for it was the ravens who retired, though in good order.

The stoop of the peregrine has been described often enough; it is an awesome spectacle; with limp

wings dangling, the stricken prey falls headlong, turning over and over much as the burning Zeppelin did one memorable night in 1916. But when soaring as it sometimes will, to an immense height, and even in heavy rain, its powers of flight are displayed almost equally to advantage. It planes easily against a strong air current with hardly a beat of its curved wings, and then, turning, sweeps down wind with a rush whose swiftness is astonishing. Once I saw a peregrine in flight turn on its back and right itself again, like a raven, from whom perhaps it had learnt the trick, for they were near neighbours.

If unmolested, there is little doubt that peregrines would soon return again to many inland haunts and nesting-places from which they have been driven by the united efforts of unscrupulous collectors and the more ignorant type of game preservers. I know of one such eyrie which has been abandoned owing to persecution during the last twenty-five years; even now peregrines are occasionally seen in the vicinity; given a chance, they would re-establish themselves. At present inland eyries are few; the cliffs of the sea coast are the peregrine's stronghold.

CHAPTER V

THE COMMON BUZZARD

Of the buzzard it is pleasant to be able to write that, of late years, it has probably not decreased in numbers; it may possibly have increased. At any rate, in the district in which most of my observations have been made, buzzards are plentiful. One observer, who spent some weeks in that neighbourhood in the spring of 1924, estimated that he saw not less than fifty birds. I frequently see three or four, and have seen as many as nine, in the air at once. Though the more ignorant type of keeper still attempts to shoot or even to poison them, others, more intelligent, are at last beginning to learn that, though their diet is varied (I have seen one carrying a snake in his talons), their principal food is rabbit.

Most of the nests which I have seen have been on sea cliffs, but buzzards also build on inland scars, and in trees. A nest I watched in 1924 was a bulky structure, in the fork of an oak, about fifty feet from the ground. The tree was on the outskirts of a wood, which clothed a steep hillside, and, by climbing to the top of the slope, it was possible to see into the nest, which contained two eggs. The outer structure was of dead branches, but the lining was of green larch twigs. Unfortunately, the spot chosen was too much frequented; after incubating for some days, the bird gave up the attempt to hatch out these eggs,

and began to make a fresh lining of larch, which was placed on the top of the clutch; but the new cup was not completed, and no more eggs were laid.

Tree nests of this species are sometimes placed in positions very easy of access. One to which I climbed in 1925 was built in the fork of a stunted oak not more than twenty feet from the ground. My attention was attracted to it by the corpse of a young buzzard, in down, lying at the foot of the tree. The nest was empty, so he was, alas, the only son (or daughter) of his mother. The contents of his stomach, when examined by Mrs. L. E. Currey, proved to be a small quantity of undigested yolk, the rib, foot-bones and portions of the hair and skin of an immature mouse, a quantity of moss, and the scales of some reptile, probably a grass snake. The presence of yolk testifies to his immaturity. Preserved in spirits he is rather a pathetic little corpse; but those whom the gods love die young.

Another nesting-site was even more conveniently placed for observation. It was a ledge, half-way down two hundred feet of precipitous cliff, which formed one side of a small gorge gnawed from the flank of an island by the hungry ocean. The inlet was so narrow that, from its opposite side, I had an unrestricted view of the nest; it was made of dead gorse branches and heather bents, and lined with moss and grass, but much flattened out by the two partly-fledged youngsters which were in occupation.

When first I saw them, they were clothed in thick, grey down, but there was a darker, almost black stripe near the eye, and patches of lighter down still adhered to their heads; in the course of a week, the brown feathers of the juvenile plumage began to show. They spent a good deal of their time in preening, and, by this process, the down gradually became less and less, until, when I left, there was as much brown as grey in their colouration; these tints harmonized most successfully with the rocks behind them, and they thus formed a good object lesson in protective colouring.

These youngsters, within the circumscribed limits of their nesting-place, were very active. Though they sat for long periods on the flat of the tarsus, supporting themselves with their half-grown tails, they occasionally stood up, and walked unsteadily a few paces; often they flapped their half-grown wings in the same way as young ravens and peregrine eyesses do; in fact, one of them performed this physical exercise with such vigour that he nearly toppled off the edge of the nest into the abyss. He also sometimes sprawled over the nest with one claw outstretched. One young bird was distinctly larger than the other, but this may be accounted for by the fact that incubation usually begins when the first egg has been laid. They had already been taught cleanly habits, and vented their excrement well out from the edge of the nest; in fact this practice was followed

by the young in all buzzards nests which I have observed.

The behaviour of the old birds while I was watching this nest was interesting. Usually one was soaring as I approached, and, by a mewing cry, gave warning to the other bird, which was either on or near the nest. Then both of them soared above me on their great moth-like wings. After a little, one, presumably the mother, became tamer; she flew in narrowing circles near the nest. The young became expectant; they sat up and looked round, bobbed their heads and flapped their wings. Eventually the old bird pitched on a pinnacle of rock, not far from me, and mewed continuously. The food provided by this pair was entirely rabbit; I frequently saw their remains on the nest.

Another nest was in a site which had been used by buzzards for many years in succession. To reach it one had to climb down a little coombe which wanders deviously, between very steep slopes of grass and screes, to the sea; the end of the descent was a cleft which skirted a rocky buttress, and finally debouched over piled boulders on the shore. The nest was at the lower end of the coombe, only about forty feet up the cliff, but difficult of access; below were smooth rocks, with no handholds, and above a jumbled mass of shale and jagged boulders which looked as if they might collapse at any moment. It was one of those places which one might reach with

luck, but where a slip would probably mean a broken limb, and perhaps a broken neck. The first year I found this nest, I reached a slab of rock a few feet above it by cutting steps in the shale with an ice axe. Craning my head over this, I looked into the nest; it was made of dead gorse stems, lined with wool, and contained one young one in down.

The next year I visited the spot earlier in the season; knowing that the old buzzards were frequenting the same site, I climbed down the end of the coombe quietly, hoping to catch the hen on her nest. When I was nearly at the bottom, I dropped my ice axe with a clatter on the rocks. Nothing stirred, so I feared the cunning old buzzard must have slipped off before my arrival. However, I walked along the shore towards the eyrie; when I was just below it, to my surprise, the buzzard's head appeared above the edge of the nest, and she flapped clumsily away without uttering a sound. Winter rains and storms had crumbled the rock and shale so that to reach the nest was even a more difficult proposition than last year, and though I made three attempts, all were unsuccessful.

On the other side of the coombe was a pinnacle of rock, overgrown with ivy. The hind-legs of a rabbit and a litter of castings strewn about on its top, showed that it was the buzzards' feeding-place. Placing myself in semi-concealment near this spot, I waited to see if the brooding bird would return.

After some twenty minutes she came sailing back over the cliffs, and pitched on a ridge some twenty-five feet from the eyrie. Three times she changed her position, throwing herself off the ridge, dropping out of sight for a few moments, and then settling nearer. Her last position was right over the nest, and I could see her glance first at the eggs and then at me – 'letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would." ' Then she hopped clumsily yet a few inches nearer, and I thought she had overcome her scruples; but at the last moment she thought better of it, and sailed off again. However, in five minutes she was back again on her old perch, and, after a few seconds' hesitation, she swooped on to the nest. I saw her arrange the eggs and settle down on them.

In 1925 I discovered another nest which allowed a fairly-close inspection. Built chiefly of heather bents, with no decoration of green twigs, on a grassy ledge some fifty feet up a cliff, precipitous in rock, grass slopes, and screes, it was well concealed; so much so that, although I had passed beneath it on several occasions while it must have been building, I only discovered it when one day I saw the old bird come off; she proved to be sitting on two eggs. I had no means of telling how long incubation had lasted, but when I visited the nest ten days later I was thrilled to find that one of the eggs was in the act of hatching. The nestling's head was already out of the egg, but the larger portion of the egg-shell

was still adhering to its body; squirming and wriggling, in a few minutes he emerged, an ugly squab in grey down. But his troubles were already beginning: the discarded egg-shell kept falling down upon him from the sides of the cup; evidently this caused him great irritation. Raising himself upon his miniature wings, he tried again and again to rid himself of the incubus by toppling it over the side of the nest; but his Sisyphean labours were all in vain:

αὖτις ἔπειτα πέδονδε κυλίνδετο λᾶας ἀναιδής—

down in a trice on the small of his back rolled the pestering egg-shell, (a very free translation of the Homeric line!), and he collapsed gasping. For half an hour I watched his futile efforts to dislodge it, and then, as the old bird had not returned, I departed. God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, but not always, alas, to the newly-hatched nestling, which is very susceptible to exposure. When I returned, two hours later, his mother was brooding him, and he seemed quite lively. The other egg was still unhatched, but there was no sign of the offending egg-shell. The extreme sensitiveness to touch of the young one's back reminded me strongly of the similar susceptibility in the nestling cuckoo: in fact, the young buzzard's actions seemed very similar to those of the young cuckoo ejecting the eggs and young of a robin from its foster parent's nest, so

vividly described by W. H. Hudson in *Hampshire Days*. There was the same evident exasperation at the touch of the intruding object, the same spasmodic effort to eject it, and the same collapse after the effort failed.

A week later both the young were crawling about the nest in grey down. In less than three weeks they were as large as pigeons; they seemed to pass most of their time in the sleep of repletion. In a month, the feathers on wing and mantle were well grown, though there was a good deal of grey down still on the head; at five weeks they looked as large as full-grown birds. The remains of decomposing rabbits were piled all round the edge of the nest, and clouds of flies buzzed above. What the stench must have been like I can only imagine; fortunately my post of observation was too far away for it to reach me. When they were five and a half weeks old all traces of down had disappeared from one of them; the other retained only a little on the cheeks; this was gone at the end of six weeks. On the forty-ninth day from the hatching of the first nestling, both were just outside the nest; evidently they were practising for the first flight, for they frequently flapped their wings and hopped in the air from one side of the nest to the other. Five days later they were gone. Six weeks is stated to be the fledgling period; probably these youngsters could have flown at the end of that time, had they wished to do so; but being lazy,

unmolested, and well fed by assiduous parents, they did not trouble to venture upon uncharted seas.

It has been recorded on satisfactory evidence that a buzzard will swoop at a man who has ventured into too close proximity to the nest. One bird was well known to do so in the Lake District some twenty years ago, and a similar instance is recorded in Wales. I have watched many pairs of nesting buzzards, but, though some are less shy than others, I have never seen any signs of aggressiveness, and I think that the Lakeland and Welsh buzzards must have been abnormally truculent. In my experience the old birds at first soar high above one; afterwards they may settle fairly near the watcher, but always at a respectful distance.

Seen from close quarters, hunched upon a rock, with the head drawn into the shoulders, and its long breast feathers blown up by the wind, the buzzard suggests vulture rather than hawk. I have on several occasions seen one try to balance itself awkwardly on quite a slim pole, one claw grasping the top and the other the side; in such a position it finds difficulty in sustaining its equilibrium. But, viewed from a distance, perched upon a tall, lone fir over-looking some wild ravine falling headlong to a spumey sea, it can look majestic, and even worthy of its relationship to the eagles.

Its method of taking to flight is ungainly; it seems almost to fall off its perch, and flaps its wings

clumsily. But when it soars, with broad wings extended and motionless, one realizes the grace and skill of its airmanship. One July evening, when the air was still, and the thin sickle of the young moon hung poised in a sky whose blue was fading to grey as it lost the rays of the declining sun, I saw three buzzards soaring. As one watched them banking and planing higher and higher, in ever-widening circles whose orbits crossed and recrossed each other, one marvelled at their consummate mastery over their element; to quote from Mr. Martin Armstrong's poem:

'On great pied motionless moth-wings borne along
So effortless and so strong,
Cutting each other's paths, together they glided,
Then wheeled asunder till they soared divided
Two valleys' width, ...
Curved headlong downward, towered up the sunny steep,
Then, with a sudden lift of the one great pinion,
Swung proudly to a curve and from its height
Took half a mile of sunlight in one long sweep.'

The upward curve of the outermost quills, held separate from each other, gives grace of line and lightness to their broad wings; and this beauty of line varies ever as you watch; for, planing into the wind, the wing tips are contracted, so that the whole pinion now forms half a circlet. It is this pose which,

by an optical illusion, makes this great bird, seen from one side when one is on a level with it, appear curiously small; so much so that a casual glance might mistake it for a kestrel. Viewed from below, the markings on their wings are of singular beauty; seen thus, their 'moth-wings' are even more moth-like than from above; their whitish under-surface is fringed with black at the extremities, and, in the middle, is an eyot or ring of dark brown which reminds me always of the 'eyes' on the chestnut upper wings of the peacock butterfly.

Beautiful as buzzards are when soaring, their strength of flight reveals itself almost to as much advantage when they are planing into a strong wind. Then they hang almost motionless; though now and again they allow themselves a few wing beats, their progress is made almost entirely by depressing and raising the angle of their wings to the wind. Gliding and careening, you may see them advance half a mile or more; such flight is even more 'effortless' and 'strong' than their wide, airy circlings. Facing the wind, they will also hover, lowering the head and spreading the tail like a kestrel, but the strokes are fewer and less strong, and their legs hang down clumsily; their broad pinions cannot winnow the air so swiftly; compared with the windhover the buzzard is a mere amateur. But when, suspended thus, he sends a ripple of movement, hardly perceptible, through the length of his quivering pinions,

you are compelled again to wonder at the splendid combination of grace and strength.

Buzzards are not loved by their brethren in feathers. Every bird's claw is against them, and it must be confessed that they often put up a poor fight even against those of a smaller size. I have seen one chased and harried by a kestrel; the jackdaw, and even the lapwing will drive him off. Jays, prone as they are to indulge in 'Billingsgate,' become even more profane at his approach. With the peregrines they carry on a constant feud. Herring and lesser black-backed gulls bully them, and the rook has no use for their company.

But, perhaps, their worst enemies are the carrion crows, who have more than the usual allowance of devilment in their make-up. I once saw a pair of these rascals subject a buzzard to a systematic course of persecution. They pursued him for some time in the air, making him turn and twist to dodge their assaults. Eventually he took refuge on a large boulder, on whose top he stood, with head down and wings raised, mewing peevishly. This suited his persecutors admirably; one attracted his attention in front, while the other attacked from behind, tweaking his tail and cursing him cacophonously. The position soon became too hot for him. He flew to an isolated pinnacle of rock, and perched there; but not for long; the crows followed him, and returned to the attack. After some feints one of them

stooped furiously, and literally knocked him off his perch, so that he cried out piteously. Rescue came at last, in the person of his mate, who afforded him her moral support, but did not come to his assistance. Even then the corvine persecution did not cease, but the aggressors were now content with words, not deeds; after expressing with a perfect torrent of invective their contempt for buzzards as a race of cowards and poltroons, they left the pair in peace.

CHAPTER VI

THIRST IN YOUNG BIRDS

The weather, while I was watching the island buzzard's nest mentioned in the last chapter, was extremely hot; the morning and midday sun, beating pitilessly against the cliff face, evidently made matters very uncomfortable for the young birds. They huddled towards the back of the nest, where a jutting piece of rock afforded them some slight shade; often they opened their mouths, and literally gasped in the overpowering heat. Once I saw one of the old buzzards, probably the hen, protecting them from the sunlight with her wings. Their evident distress raised the query in my mind, do young birds never need to drink while in the nest? Of course, some nestlings are fed by regurgitation, and, by this means, doubtless assimilate a certain amount of moisture; others are supplied by their parents with succulent grubs and caterpillars, which must have certain thirst-quenching properties. But young buzzards, in common with the nestlings of other raptorial species, are fed chiefly on red meat. True, their diet includes frogs and reptiles, and moist flesh of this kind may slake thirst a little; but one would imagine that raw meat, though containing a large percentage of water, would increase it.

As I was unable to find much literature on this

subject, I communicated with several well-known naturalists, to see whether they could supply me with any information, and several have kindly given me the benefit of their views. Captain C. W. R. Knight tells me (*in lit.*) that, though he has studied various species of hawk in this country at close quarters, he has never seen them bring drink to their young. He agrees that birds who are fed by regurgitation, or on caterpillars, do absorb a certain amount of moisture, but he thinks that young hawks would absorb considerably more since they are fed on fresh-killed meat. Mr. J. H. Owen, whose observations of nesting sparrow-hawks are well known, tells me (*in lit.*) that he has no record of any kind of nestlings being supplied with moisture in any way. He has watched several species when they were exposed to direct hot sunshine, and always one or other parent bird shielded them with great care; the methods adopted were variations of those of the sparrow-hawk. He adds that no nestling seems able to stand the hot sun for long, but he thinks that young hawks can do so more than naked nestlings; all of them seem to get a kind of saliva in their mouths when exposed. I may add, in this connection, that a friend of mine, who has kept various species of hawks, assures me that they rarely drink in captivity: they may take a sip or two, but that is all. Montagu, in his *Dictionary of Birds*, says that he kept eagles, owls and hawks for years without their ever tasting water.

Mr. William Beebe, the American naturalist, in *Galápagos: World's End*, quotes a statement from *A Cruising Voyage Around the World*, by Captain James Colnett, that in 1793, a party sent on shore by him on one of the Galápagos Islands observed an old bird (species not stated) supplying its young with drink by squeezing the berry of a tree into their mouths; it was about the size of a pea, and contained a watery juice of an acid but not unpleasant taste. He adds that the leaves of these trees absorb copious dews, and that birds pierce them with their bills for the moisture they retain; but that when the dews fail, thousands of them perish, for, on his return journey, he found great numbers of them dead in their nests. These statements made by a man who was obviously not a skilled ornithologist, cannot necessarily be taken to be conclusive; but it is interesting to note that Miss E. L. Turner, in *Broadland Birds*, states that corn-buntings about twice a day administer ivy berries to their young, and that blackbirds, and thrushes, feed their nestlings with these berries, but never more than twice a day. She suggests that this fruit must possess some virtue which, in small doses, is good for nestlings. I have read that scientific persons are sometimes intolerant of a humourous treatment of a subject. If so, so much the worse for them. At the risk of being considered frivolous, I venture to remind the reader that Culpeper says that the yellow berries of ivy are good against the

jaundice and a drunken surfeit, and help the spitting of blood; they also prevent and heal the plague, and divers other dulcet diseases to which I will not refer in his homely language. Possibly the wise bird-parents know all this, but I do not think it impossible that the effect of the berries is to allay thirst.

Mr. P. A. Buxton's book *Animal Life in Deserts*, contains much interesting information (which he has kindly given me leave to quote) on the question of water supply for (*inter alia*) birds in such regions. He points out that perhaps the most obvious source of moisture is dew, but that observations of dew drinking by small animals are very few. Desert vegetation, is, he thinks, a more constant supply: even 'dead' plants are not chemically dry; also, 'it has been suggested that during digestion . . . a certain additional amount of water may be elaborated as a by-product of the breaking down of the complex chemical bodies of which the plant consists.' 'It is almost certain,' he says, 'that many birds . . . depend solely upon the minute quantities of water to be found in seeds and dead plants which have become completely "air-dry."' In this connection it is interesting to note that Mr. Beebe states, in *Galápagos: World's End*, that on the island called Daphne, which is, apparently, waterless, he saw adult sturdy ground finches (*Geospiza fortis*) feeding a fledged young one on *seeds*, as well as on caterpillars.

Mr. Buxton says that various species of sand-

grouse, which inhabit nearly every part of the Great Palæarctic Desert, water at certain spots on the banks of rivers at regular hours, some species at different times of the day, others at night. Both sexes of these birds at all seasons normally stand in shallow water when drinking, and, as their legs are short, their breasts become saturated. Native hunters have always asserted that they carry water to their young in the desert in their saturated breast plumage. This, says Mr. Buxton, has been proved to be correct by Mr. Meade-Waldo, who has hatched broods of various species of sandgrouse (*Pterocles alchata*, *P. arenarius*, and *P. exustus*) in his aviaries. To quote Mr. Meade-Waldo, 'The male rubs his breast violently up and down on the ground – a motion quite distinct from dusting – and when his feathers are awry gets into his drinking water and saturates the feathers of his underparts. When soaked he goes through the motion of flying away, nodding his head, etc.; then, remembering his family is close by, he would run to the hen, make a demonstration, when the young run out, get under him and suck the water from his breast – the appearance being that of a mammal suckling her young. The young pass the feathers through their bills, and keep changing places till the supply becomes exhausted. Until the young can fly *they take water in no other way*, and the cock gives it to the young only.'

Mr. Meade-Waldo tells me (*in lit.*) that the young

of all of the three species of *Pterocles* mentioned above have the same remarkable habit; only the male soaks his breast feathers. He never gives water to the hen, who, of course, flies and gets what she wants when he takes her place, but gives it only to the young. He has seen wild males soaking themselves, in precisely the same way, in Morocco, and when watering the animals in the desert. They had no fear, and would eagerly come to get water slopped over at the wells before it had absorbed. He has also seen them act in the same way at an irrigation channel in the middle of a village.

Young sandgrouse are hatched when the air is hot and dry. Mr. Buxton has seen them running about, even during the hot hours, near their parents, but not sheltered by them. As their body temperature is some 50 degrees below that of the surface of the desert, they can only maintain their temperature, he says, by evaporating water; hence the special methods evolved to supply them with it. But, as he points out, other desert birds appear to live successfully without watering their chicks at all. So far as we know none of the small desert birds give water to their young by regurgitation, and certainly none carry water in their breast feathers. A group of birds, which includes the Houbara bustard, the chough thrushes, and the larks *Alaemon* and *Ammomanes*, and others, seems to be entirely independent of water, or rather to depend solely on the water

which they can obtain from dew, insects, and the vegetation.

I wrote to Mr. Buxton on the subject, and he kindly tells me (*in lit.*) that he thinks when he wrote his book he made a rather false distinction between water drunk, *quâ* water, and water swallowed in food. 'We eat, and we drink; many creatures do not make a distinction, they eat damp food'; the distinction is, he thinks, bad physiology. He adds that his letter is written away from books, and only gives his impression.

I think Mr. Buxton's letter probably affords the correct solution of the problem. Most nestling birds seem able to do without water, except in so far as it is contained in the food supplied to them by their parents, or reaches them by natural means, i.e., in rain or dew. I have observed the feeding of numerous nestling British birds, but only once have seen any indication of their being supplied with water in addition to their food; a pair of grey wagtails, watched by me in the summer of 1925, dipped in the stream beakfulls of flies and other insects before feeding their almost fledged young with them. Dippers, and other aquatic or partially aquatic birds, presumably bring a certain amount of moisture to their nestlings along with the water larvæ which they give them. I do not see that it would be impossible for the parents to carry water, alone and apart from food, in their beaks to their young in the nest. But

there is, so far as I am aware, no evidence whatever that they do so. Still, it is obvious that many adult birds are not satisfied with the moisture which reaches them in damp food; chaffinches (even when only just fledged) and robins quench their thirst copiously at my bird-bath every day. I have seen a jay drink, lifting his head like a domestic fowl; goldfinches enjoy a sip in a clear stream, and so do ringdoves. House-sparrows, too, are thirsty souls.

There can be no doubt that nestlings often feel the heat intensely. Mr. A. H. Willford has recently described (in *British Birds*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 293–5) how some nestling skylarks which he was watching were killed by hot sun, and how another brood of this species was rescued from a similar fate by the old bird shading them with her wings. He tells me (*in lit.*) that he has since seen other birds (including young nightjars) which died through exposure to the sun's rays. That nightjars should suffer in this way is curious. I have myself seen their young, fledged and partly fledged, unbrooded in very hot sun, apparently without ill-effects to them; they are by nature birds of the desert, and one would have expected that they would have been able to endure a good deal of heat. I have seen young carrion-crows and young tree-pipits panting with open beaks at noontide; and many observers have recorded that the old birds of various species shade their young with their wings from the sun's rays. Nests built in

holes, or domed, are partially, at any rate, protected from heat, and the same applies to those placed among thick foliage. Nestlings hatched on the ground, or in the open, of course suffer most from excess of sun, and therefore from thirst. Woodlarks sometimes leave partly-fledged young unprotected from fierce sunlight, but I have noticed that their nests are usually shaded on the south side.

The whole subject is interesting, and field-naturalists might with profit turn their attention to its more complete elucidation.

CHAPTER VII

BIRDS IN A MENDIP WOOD

The wood is a long, straggly one. Much of it stands on a high plateau, from which there is a broad prospect westwards to 'the long, green roller of the down' which marks the edge of Salisbury Plain. But, on one side, it slopes gently to a brook, which babbles and chatters inconsequently over grey stones, and all along another a second stream runs at the bottom of a deep and rocky gorge. 'I s'pose this here was scooped out by the Flood' was the explanation of its origin given me by an old woodman friend.

There are few old trees, and most of it is covered with saplings, but it is rich in bird life. The redstart ('red-stëort' my woodman calls it, and quite correctly too, for 'stëort' is Anglo-Saxon for 'tail') breeds here; so do the blackcap, the white-throat, and the garden warbler. The chiff-chaff's shivering song is heard all day; along the stream you may catch the glint of the kingfisher's dark emerald, the yellow and blue livery of the 'grey' wagtail, or the chequered reflection of the dipper's parsonical white collar. Occasionally the jay nests here; I was interested to note that the partly fledged young in one nest had the mottled-blue wing-feathers well grown, although other parts of their bodies were almost bare. And at dusk the 'night-crow' (i.e. the nightjar) spins his

To face p. 126.] [*Photograph* R. P. GAIT.

DIPPER

humming wheel, and launches from the bare branch on his curious, mothlike flight.

It was in this wood that I first had an opportunity of observing the song and habits of the nightingale. It did not take me long to explode the popular fallacy that the nightingale sings only after dark. As a matter of fact, he sings at morning, noon and night, though his finest efforts seemed to be reserved for the first hour after sunset. I have alluded in another chapter to Shakespeare's, or rather Portia's, curious error on this point. I will only here hazard the further guess whether the poet may not have heard Mary Fitton (whom some have thought to be the 'dark lady' of the Sonnets) make this very blunder, as, indeed she might well have done, for she was born and bred in Cheshire, where the nightingale is almost unknown.

But though the question of light or darkness does not affect the nightingale's song, it is influenced by changes of weather. One year he sang every day through the heat of the June mornings and afternoons. Then came a cold, rainy spell; the music ceased at once, and I never heard it again either by day or night during the remainder of my visit. I am, of course, aware that the nightingale is said to become mute when the young are hatched, and this may usually be the case, though, as mentioned in another chapter, it does not invariably happen. But there were half-a-dozen nightingales, at least, in full

song up and down the wood before the rain and cold came, and it is hardly likely that all of them can have been made happy fathers exactly on the same day. It is known that cold, to a certain extent, affects bird song in winter; the throstles sing on mild days in December, but a snap of frost shuts them up at once. I have no doubt that the nightingale, the doyen of feathered songsters, has sensibilities equally delicate.

What strikes one first, on hearing the 'tale of Philomel,' is its infinite variety in compass, notes and colour. I know no bird with such consummate mastery over *piano* and *forte* passages. Listening, I have heard some of its sweetest notes crooned so softly that they have been almost drowned by the babble of the woodland brook at my feet; and then, a moment after, there has burst out a flood of melody, throbbing so loud and clear that it must have carried at least half a mile. Some notes recall the sedge-warbler's guttural chatter, others the clear pipe of the throstle, or the distant reel of the nightjar; but Philomel, exquisitely weaving these widely differing songs into one, refines them all. We recognize them in his melody, but they have suffered a change 'into something rich and strange.' They are but threads in the woof and weft of his song-tapestry. And it is this quality of 'rich and strange' that separates the nightingale's song from all others; it finds its fullest expression in those individual notes which are heard

in its song alone. I mean those long-drawn plaintive, human tones, now high, now low, with which it often begins and ends its cadenzas. Some naturalists have expressed disappointment with the nightingale's carol, and have described it as little superior to that of the blackcap, or to the throstle's 'plain song pipe.' For myself, I put the blackbird far above the two last-named as a singer, but, even including him, it seems to me that such a comparison ignores this same richness and strangeness which is the very essence of the song. As my woodman friend once aptly expressed it to me, 'Five or six of 'em whistling all at once do seem to fair charm the bottom' (i.e. the valley). That, I am sure, is the quality which has, through the ages, made so strong and deep an appeal to the poets of all nations. Keats, a town-bred Cockney, be it remembered, must have felt its mystery, when the song made him muse on

> 'Magic casements opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas in faërie lands forlorn.'

In this wood I found the nightingale a shy bird, and difficult to approach at close quarters. The poet Clare, usually a good observer, says

> 'When first we hear the shy-come nightingales,
> They seem to mutter o'er their songs in fear,
> And, climb we e'er so soft the spinney rails,
> All stops as if no bird was anywhere.'

Another observer, however, has told me that his experience on the east coast differed from mine, and that he found it quite easy to observe. Subsequently, in another district, I have found them far less shy, but on that occasion they were feeding young in the nest. But the woodland nightingales were so sensitive that it was some days before I could get a good view of one. I would creep near the songster, taking every possible cover, and then be rewarded only by the sight of a furtive flick of his chestnut tail, as, with an angry croak, he disappeared into the undergrowth. At last, one day, I concealed myself beneath a small ash-sapling from whose branches the bird had been singing a few minutes previously. Soon he came back and pitched right above me, and sang a few bars of rapturous song before he discovered my presence. The tail is dull red, like a redstart's, but shows up quite brightly when the sun shines on it. It is this colouring, combined with the clear brown feathers on the back which justifies Swinburne's phrase, 'the brown, bright nightingale amorous,' which so aptly renders Homer's *χλωηρὶς ἀηδών*. The breast is fawn, the iris large and black, and the bird's general appearance is plump and comfortable-looking.

A few days later, I was lucky enough to get a view of a nightingale in full song. During the famous trill passages the whole body, from head to tail, quivered and thrilled with emotion; its whole soul

was thrown into the performance. By contrast, during the wailing notes, the singer relapsed into trancèd stillness. It rarely sings from the top of a tree, in spite of the illustrations which depict it in that position. Usually it takes its stand some two-thirds of the way up a small bush or sapling, and often makes a quick flight to a fresh position between each bout of song.

The nest is usually low down in brambles or other undergrowth, often about a foot from the ground. The nightingale's well-known partiality for oak leaves is interesting; one nest which I found had a chaplet of them neatly arranged round its rim, though there were no oak trees within several hundred yards of the site. Both parents were feeding russet-downed young in this nest. Two alarm notes were used by the old birds: one, whom from her more excessive anxiety I took to be the female, vented her feelings in a shrill peevish cry; the other, from a more respectful distance, showed his annoyance by a deep, guttural croak. A nest discovered the next year, within a few yards of the same site, and, therefore, perhaps made by the same pair, had no oak leaves in it.

Another bird, whose better acquaintance I was glad to make in the Mendip wood, was the red-backed shrike. While watching in a little dingle on the edge of the cover, my attention was called to his presence by the discordant sounds of a most unholy

squabble, in the branches of an oak tree, some thirty yards away. Budding foliage prevented more than a fleeting glimpse of the combatants, but, as they were two males, no doubt the quarrel was a battle of the suitors, preliminary to the satisfactory adjustment of matters matrimonial. Subsequently, I got a good view of the victor. He was perched at the top of a tall sapling, giving vent to a low, chiding note, which may perhaps be interpreted as a self-satisfied celebration of victory achieved. He was certainly in fine feather. French grey was his head, reddish brown his wings, and the dull white of his breast was tinted with a delicate rose. A thick, black streak, extending from the root of his beak towards the back of his head, imparted a malevolent appearance to his physiognomy. Anon he would flirt his tail, and make a rapid dash into the neighbouring brake; no doubt his object was lethal, but the thickness of foliage prevented ocular proof.

I searched the dingle carefully in the hope of finding the nest. At length, in the middle of a remarkably prickly thorn-bush, I lit upon an untidy structure, almost as large as a song-thrush's nest, which might be what I was looking for. The foundation was of lichen, the outside of bents, and the lining of moss and hair. Two days after I paid another visit, and found that my surmise was correct. The nest contained an undoubted red-backed

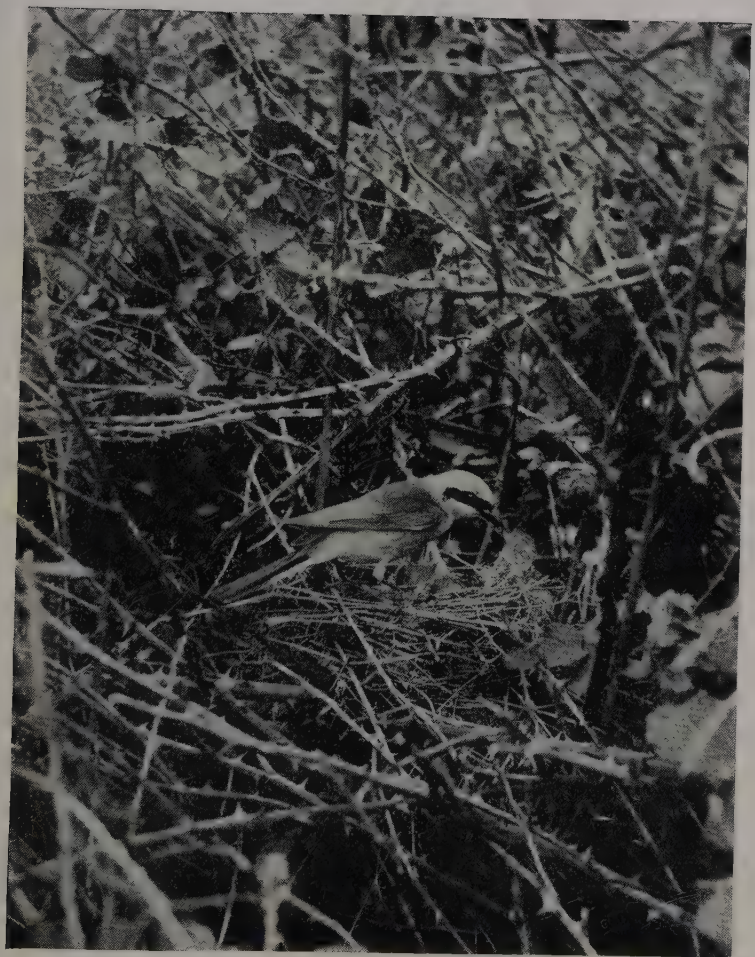
shrike's egg, cream-coloured, with a ring of spots, brown, reddish-brown, and pale purple, round its larger end. Unfortunately, in removing it for inspection, my sleeve caught in one of the many barbs of thorn, and the egg was jerked out of my hand and fell; to my disgust, I saw that it was cracked. I was in doubt what to do, for, if the shrikes found the egg gone, they might desert the nest. However, when the yolk had drained away, the egg did not show much sign of external damage, so I replaced it, and hoped for the best. Fortunately my ruse succeeded. The next day there was a sound egg in the nest; but the broken one had disappeared, and I could find no trace of egg-shells.

The same day for the first time I saw the hen bird. I have described, in another chapter, the uncanny malevolence of her aspect. Another interesting point about her was her wonderful protective colouring. Approaching the thorn-bush in which the nest was built, I saw, what at first seemed to be a large dead leaf, hanging in the lower branches. Turning my glasses upon it, I discovered that the dead leaf was a live bird – the hen red-backed shrike – very much intent on my movements. Crouching motionless upon her perch with her head slightly bent, her fawn breast veined with darker brown, she would certainly have escaped my notice had I not been on the look-out for her.

Later on, in another district, where these birds

are commoner, I was able to watch them during the periods of incubation and the rearing of the young. The nest is said usually to be an untidy structure, and it often is; but one, which I had under observation in the summer of 1924, was remarkably neat in construction. Outside were moss and large bents, but inside smaller bents and wool had been employed. Except for the remains of beetles' wings, it was quite clean, and showed no traces of excrement; indeed, I had frequently seen the old birds removing it, sometimes so far as a hundred yards away from the nest. There are, in my experience, usually five or six eggs; their wonderful variety is, unfortunately, only too well known to the acquisitive collector, but the commonest type has a buff ground, with red, grey or brown markings in a circlet, which, however, is not always at the larger end of the egg, but sometimes near the middle. I believe the female only incubates; at any rate, I have never found the male sitting, though I have seen him feed the hen while she is on the eggs. The young, when partly fledged, have the back covered with down of a bright brown colour, and yellow gapes. Both parents assist in feeding them, but the cock shows greater boldness than the hen in doing this, when under observation; in fact, the hen is often reluctant to approach the nest under such circumstances.

The larder belonging to this pair was extensive



To face p. 134.] [*Photograph* MISS P. M. JAMES.

MALE RED-BACKED SHRIKE AT NEST

and catholic; it was spread all round the neighbourhood of the nest, but not in its immediate vicinity, the nearest morsel to the site being a humble bee, about seventeen yards away. I found no other impaled victims within forty yards of the nest. Humble bees (*Bombus lucorum*, queen and worker, and *B. lapponicus*) were the commonest victims. They were impaled, some horizontally, some vertically, upon the spikes of sloe bushes; but there were also cockchafers. Observing the cock bringing red meat to the nest, I tracked him to a hawthorn, and here found the legs and feathers of two small fledgling birds; the remains were not complete enough to make identification of the species possible, but I believe they belonged to the common whitethroat and some other species of warbler.

I have often wondered whether the contents of the larder are used to feed the young after they are fledged. I saw many impaled bees and cockchafers at different distances from the nest, while incubation was in process, and after the young were hatched. About a month after they had flown, these dainties were all missing; it may be that the young find and eat them, but as I have never seen a young bird help himself to one of these desiccated carcasses, I cannot say whether they derive sustenance from them. Nor can I find that any field naturalist has observed it happening.

The old woodman called the red-backed shrikes

'cuckoo-granfers.' In H. K. Swann's *Dictionary of English and Folknames of British Birds*, 'Cuckoo's Maid' is given as a Hereford name for this bird, 'because it feeds the young cuckoo.' Probably this is also the origin of the Somerset name.

CHAPTER VIII

EXMOOR AND ITS BIRDS IN WINTER

When first I knew Exmoor I was, though a West-countryman born and bred, an exile north of the Trent. Perhaps only such an exile can realize how the greyness of winter in the bleak, cold climate of a northern manufacturing district stifles mind and body. The eye forgets, the brain recalls but hardly that mellow winter sunshine which one finds, at any rate on occasion, in some parts of more favoured Wessex. The choking grip of fog begets longing for brighter skies. Thoughts turn to Somerset lanes, whose high banks and pleached boughs embalm, even at Christmas, something of the mellower breath of summer; to windy wastes of moorland over which blow the winds of the Atlantic.

It was good, in those days, to escape from such a murky environment for a brief space in mid-winter. Those whose knowledge of the West is gained only from a short summer holiday, can have no idea of the beauty of moor and coombe when the leaves are off the trees and the purple is gone from the heather. Even now, when I look out every morning and see the sun rise over Exmoor, the memory of those short respites is refreshing. My spirits always rose when I was south of Bristol. The train slipped past the woods of Cleeve; on the left Blackdown and the

western Mendips appeared; then Bleadon Hill, and, on the right, Worle Hill above Weston; the low grey line of the distant Channel, and the humped back of Brean Down, where the ravens build. Then Brent Knoll, ringed with its ancient British camp, and misty flats, stretching past Cheddar Cliffs and the southern bastions of the Mendips, almost to Cranmore Tower and Stourton Stump. And so on, past Highbridge, and the Burnham sandhills, till, away in the east, the Tor of Glastonbury recalled Joseph of Arimathea and his thorn, and King Arthur in

> 'the island valley of Avilion
> Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
> Nor ever wind blows loudly.'

And then Bridgwater and Sedgemoor, with its memories of Kirke, the butcher, and Jeffreys, the brute; and the Isle of Athelney where Alfred burnt the cakes; and so to Taunton, with its twin red towers.

Sometimes the last stage of the journey found me jogging along miles of sticky red road, behind a pony whose white flanks steamed beneath flickering carriage lamps, while from a collied sky rain plashed steadily and vindictively. It seemed as though that northern greyness had dogged my footsteps to smother up the sunshine of the west.

But morning brought a change. Waking, I caught glimpses of red earth and dark firs, rising to a clear sky above distant hills. A robin's desultory cadence floated faintly from the garden; then, more loudly, a wren wound his cheerful challenge. Outside, sunlight, clear sunlight.

Starting for the moors, I revelled in the glory of the morning. To feel the sun, low in the south-east, beat warm on face and hands; to watch the glowing red of the ploughed fields, whose wet furrows were facets for slanting shafts of light. To drink in the deep green of the water-meadows; to watch pools flashing, now blue as sapphire, now grey as beryl, where the floods were out; to let the eye wander up the slopes of Dunkery, dun with faded heather, tawny with dead bracken, dimpled with fleeting patches of mottled light and dark, as though the winds were scattering sunshine and shade in handfuls. Pure light was everywhere. It streamed through me with the rushing wind; it cleansed blood and spirit, scoured foul humours from body and brain. A joyful buoyancy possessed me. The mystery of flight was, for the moment, unveiled. I was one with the scudding cloud, the winnowing wind, the hovering hawk. Light transformed everything. I marvelled at the bright yellow of the blue-tit's breast, a warmer hue than the pale amber of the bud he pecked. Up the slope a flock of goldfinches rose from a patch of thistles, with a flicker of golden

wings and a delightful twittering, like the faint, metallic patter of raindrops upon water. The yellow-hammer's head, as he flirted across the lane, was a tiny globe of pure orange. The bullfinch's rose-ruddy breast burned like a jewel, which blended the splendour of the sunset and the pagan beauty of a smouldering heath fire.

Clouds came sailing across the moor, blotting out the sun, and bringing the cold sting of rain. But neither rain nor cloud could dim the bright memory of that morning. All day it glowed in my brain, and in the night I awoke and remembered it. It is, even now, a living memory.

Somerset lanes have their charm even in winter. Exmoor at this season has two climates; the stark moorland is often ten degrees colder than the coombes. You may find cats' ice on Dunkery, and yet be too hot walking by the side of Horner Water, although you are clad only in ordinary winter clothing. Little congregations of midges hang between the high banks and hedgerows; you will often see a small bird dart out suddenly from the foliage, and hover among them; it is the goldcrest, gathering a rather scrappy meal in mid-air. Poised thus, he seems like a tiny humming-bird, transported hither from the tropics, painted a dull green-brown (except for the streak of gold upon his poll) to harmonize with our less brilliant landscape. On sheltered banks the spring flowers are already in

bloom, though not, of course, in profusion; periwinkle and violet, crane's bill and red campion, primrose, lesser celandine, and forget-me-not – I have found them all in flower in a Christmas morning's walk.

After a couple of nights of hard frost the sodden and boggy moorland rings hard as iron to the tread, and the wind, scudding over snowy, glistening wastes, bites with an even sharper fang. It is the grandest weather imaginable for a day's tramp. For once, the sky is a dome of pure azure, waning to paler blue and faint gold where the winter sun, even at noonday, hangs low in the south. The moor seems silent and desolate beneath its snowy pall, as though all life were blotted out. And yet this winding sheet shows us that the blank waste is the teeming home and hunting-ground of countless small folk, furred and feathered. Along this path a fox has padded cautiously in the moonlight; his footsteps lead ominously to a rabbit warren. No doubt he levied his toll, yet the maze of little footprints round the burrows give promise of many another supper for him. Slot of deer, too, there are in plenty, stag, hind and calf; some have trotted quietly enough in single file, but here a stag has leaped the bank, and plunged deep into the drift on the other side. And you may mark how the smaller fry have busied themselves about their affairs; voles and mice have hopped and scurried along their own minute and winding path-

ways, and weasels, too, who take a particular, but unaltruistic, interest in their doings! As for the stoat, when you meet him, ask what he knows of the rabbit with glazed eyes and round hole bitten out neatly at the base of his neck. And here, too, have come the rascally carrion crows, ever intent on mischief, and at least one raven; you can see the marks left by his large and spatulate feet and by his wing quills, as he flapped against the snow when he croaked and took flight at the scent of danger.

Smaller birds than these manage to pick up a living on the moor in hard weather. One winter morning, when snow-drifts several feet deep made the roads impassable, and the whole country was buried beneath a white blanket, I found a robin, at an altitude of some 1,150 feet, flying and creeping furtively in and out of the furze. Only a little lower down, I encountered two more redbreasts, a bullfinch and a goldcrest. The snow had not percolated the thick, prickly masses of gorse, and beneath and among them these birds were apparently gleaning a precarious livelihood. Even in the severest weather the indomitable wren clings to the bleak moors. The hardihood of these diminutive birds, which are among the smallest we possess in England, is astonishing. When everything is covered with snow, one never fails to find them among the heather and gorse so high as a thousand, and up to thirteen and fourteen hundred feet. Snow rarely presses deep heather

quite flat; there are always some interstices, and this is, of course, true to an even greater extent of gorse. Creeping among the undergrowth, this mouse-like little creature contrives to find something to eat when larger birds, like the more delicate redwing, are found frozen to death under the clump of ling which has proved to be their last refuge. The wren seems to be at home everywhere. I have often watched him scuttering and fluttering along the crumbled banks of a partly frozen water-course, peering into every cranny, and seeking out the trifles which serve to sustain vitality in his small but sturdy body. He always keeps his absurd little tail well up. 'Never say die' might be his motto, and that indeed is the *motif* of his cheery song – so large in volume for so small a bird – which bursts out irrepressibly on the smallest provocation in the dullest and most depressing of winter days.

The snow does not lie for long on the marshes and boggy pastures which, in some places, stretch from the foothills to the shingle bank which bars out the sea. At dusk, after a day of almost incessant snow, a green oasis in one of these meadows was alive with gulls and lapwings, whose querulous cries and calls sounded eerily in the gathering gloom. The next day the snow had vanished almost entirely from the marshlands, though it still lay deep on the moor, and, indeed, as I learned afterwards, over almost the whole of southern England. To this hospitable clearing

had flocked hosts of hungry migrants, starved out of their usual haunts. Only a Rabelaisian catalogue could enumerate them completely. Redwings – the tenderest of the wintering thrushes – were diligently probing the sodden turf, and among them, in smaller numbers, were fieldfares, frozen out from the higher levels. Skylarks were literally swarming; at least a dozen flocks rose with pleasant twittering in every field, and one of them numbered between two hundred and three hundred birds – truly an 'exaltation' of larks, to use the old fowling term.

Congregations of lapwings, peevishly complaining, in spite of the plentiful food supply, chaffinches, brown linnets and meadow-pipits were almost equally numerous. Thrusting and hustling starlings rose in clouds, and, skimming and circling, settled again to resume their search for succulent grubs and such 'small deer'; and with and among them, gulls, common and black-headed, swirled and screamed in a dazzle of white and glistening wings. Among the chaffinches were a few bramblings, the males conspicuous with jet-black heads and white rumps, a goldfinch in crimson and gold, and a pair or two of stonechats. From the marsh rose a wisp of snipe, half a dozen noisy redshanks, and a bunch of some sixty teal; overhead, their clear, trilling whistle announced the presence of a small trip of golden plover. A little owl, flitting with quick, spasmodic

wing-beats from hedgerow to hedgerow, awoke from the chaffinches, thrushes and blackbirds a chorus of protest which betrayed his evil reputation.

But winter on Exmoor is rigorous only in spasms. We have other visitors who appear both during colder spells and in milder periods. Not the least welcome of these are the siskins, which in small flocks creep and flutter among birch and alder: they are confiding little birds; they will hang within a couple of yards of the watcher, clinging to the catkins which they tear to pieces, and then suddenly go up with a flurry of green and golden wings and a shrill chatter of small pipings. Redpolls resemble siskins in their habits, and in their spasmodic arrivals and departures; they are equally jolly little fellows to watch, with their stripy brown plumage, relieved with a red top-knot and a black bib: they are more addicted than siskins to feeding on the ground, but, like their cousins, have a tantalizing habit of swooping upwards out of sight in a fit of waywardness just as one has begun to enjoy observing them at close quarters. Crossbills, too, visit us, but not usually in large numbers, and every year one sees a few black-redstarts.

Sometimes an exceptionally mild winter tempts a summer visitor to linger. It was a surprise during one December and January to find, in a sheltered brake of woodland, gorse and brambles, which

fringes the last reach of a stream before it meets the sea, a small warbler searching the remnants of a briony tangle for any food. Now and again he sallied forth to take toll from among a little cloud of ephemeral midges. Though he was mute, his dark legs proclaimed him a chiff-chaff. His usual winter quarters lie in southern Europe and northern Africa. Except for wheatears, chiff-chaffs are the earliest of our migrants to return, and, as occasionally they are reported from the western counties in the winter months, it may be that they do not all leave us. That one of them should sometimes find the food supply sufficient for his needs in West Somerset in mid-winter is a tribute to the geniality of our climate.

The temperate periods awaken in birds the nuptial instinct; they mistake a warm winter day for the approach of spring, and indulge in courtship displays. But these may sometimes be observed, too, even in cold weather, if the sun is shining brightly. One December morning, when the wind was south-east and the ground hard with frost except where the mid-day sun had thawed it, I saw a common redshank, presumably a male, chasing another on the ground near the marsh. Both birds described a kind of zig-zag or curved course, the pursuer running with outstretched head and wings fully spread; he kept on the outside of the pursued, and, as he ran, trilled excitedly. When at close quarters, he leaped in the

air and hovered over the other – obviously a female. She took to flight, and the chase was continued on the wing. On the same marsh I have heard the bubbling spring cry of the curlew in January and February, and in November the trilling note of the ringed-plover, which is so familiar in the breeding-season.

I have seen the common wren shivering its wings as it approached another in December. I have alluded in an earlier chapter to the courtship displays of woodlarks seen by me from October to December. A friend once described to me how he saw a dipper soaring in the air and singing in November; this is part of the courtship display. I myself have seen one dipper chasing the other and calling loudly in December; this may have been a contest for territory, but I think it more likely that it was connected with mating. In the same month, in mild weather, two dunnocks may often be seen fighting, with a third in attendance but passive: probably two males are contending for a female. The eternal triangle also may explain the ferocious behaviour of a great-tit who pecked and dragged about the dead body of a rival one December morning, for here too a third great-tit was an apparently uninterested spectator, though later the victor joined her.

I once saw a rook being fed by another on Christmas Day: this is, of course, part of their courtship ritual. Ravens somersault in November and Decem-

ber; this is not necessarily courtship behaviour, as the performance may be seen in most months of the year, but as ravens nest so early it may possibly be connected with mating. One mild New Year's Day, I heard the great spotted woodpecker drumming: though this is its 'song,' I cannot say definitely it was on this occasion a mating signal, though having regard to the genial climatic conditions I strongly suspect that it was.

At the risk of compiling a list which to some may seem a dull repetition, mention must be made in this chapter of some birds which are found on the higher levels of the moor in winter. Red-grouse and black game live there at all seasons. Since their re-introduction, it is generally admitted that the former have increased and are increasing, but it is regrettably true that the latter are more scarce than they were twenty years ago: one sees many more black-cock than grey-hens. Red-grouse keep to the higher levels: I have never come across them below the thousand-foot contour. The crow tribe are also permanent residents; ravens and carrion crows perform their knavish tricks in winter as well as in summer; the higher the death-rate in sheep and lambs, the better for them; they like their mutton high. Rooks, jackdaws and magpies are common; jays increased during the war, and are still plentiful. Common buzzards are certainly more numerous than formerly, but the rough-legged I have only once identified.

Peregrines make devastating forays upon the flocks of migratory wood-pigeons which plague the farmers in the winter months. The kestrel is always in evidence, but sparrow-hawks are considerably scarcer: game preservers do not love them. The little owl has gained a footing on parts of Exmoor, and being a pertinacious species will probably extend its range. Golden plover are frequently seen on the higher altitudes; after frost or snow I often see flocks of these birds, and of lapwings, flying over in succession towards the south. Fieldfares and redwings are plentiful throughout the winter months, though the latter are less hardy, and show a preference for the more sheltered localities.

Woodpeckers naturally keep to the wooded coombes, but occasionally I have noticed the green, which is by far the commonest species, feeding on the ground on the open moor as high as nine hundred feet. The other two kinds are rather unevenly distributed, and the same applies to the nuthatch. Common snipe haunt the boggy patches in winter. Woodcock vary considerably in different years. There is some evidence of winter movements of water-rails; two were found injured in one district in October and November of the same year. The dipper clings to the upland streams unless frozen out; most of the grey wagtails descend to the lower reaches, but a few are still faithful to their summer haunts. Brown linnets and goldfinches are present

in rough pastures which skirt the open moor, but usually in smaller parties. In spring and summer skylarks and meadow-pipits get up every few yards as one walks through the heather, but in winter they are few and far between, and sometimes entirely absent. After frost one often sees small flocks of them flying southwards. Bramblings occur in small batches in most winters, but, in my experience, are never so common as in more northern latitudes. The cruel winter of 1916–17 wiped out the long-tailed tit in many parts of the country, and even in our more equable climate it suffered severely: but it soon recovered, and is now quite the commonest of our local tits in coombes and copses. A few tree-sparrows sometimes come to the stackyards, but they are uncommon.

The birds mentioned above do not, of course, exhaust the list of winter residents and visitors. So long as the collector of eggs and skins is allowed to cast a blight over the country-side it is impossible to mention the occurrence of the rarer species. Efforts are on foot to make Exmoor a protected area, and eventually they will be successful. Protected and properly watched, it will form a valuable and instructive nature reservation; when that time comes such extreme caution may no longer be necessary: at present reticence is the watchword for all who have at heart the welfare of bird-life.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to say wherein

lies the charm of Exmoor. Perhaps, in spite of its varying moods, it is in its unchangeableness; and this aspect impresses itself upon one most in the austerity of winter. If you climb to the top of Dunkery and watch the storms come sweeping up from the dim outline of Dartmoor, over Anstey Barrows, across the valleys of Barle and Exe to Rowbarrow and Robin Howe, swallowing up Croydon Hill, and rolling on across the Quantocks, up the coast-line to Brent Knoll and Brean Down and the Mendips; watch the rainbows throwing up their arches in succession from the Flat Holme to Glastonbury, and from the crags of Hurlstone to Dunster, you recognize that Exmoor, the wild heart of Wessex, is unassailable in her taciturn aloofness. Celt, Saxon, Dane, Norman – she saw them come and go, took their sons and daughters and welded them, gold, silver and alloy, into the English race. Unmoved and unpitying she saw them; met them with smile or frown, but no 'sound of human sorrow mounts to mar her sacred everlasting calm.' And beast and bird, her children, who live nearer her than man, they, too, are unchanged. The red-deer still roam there as in William Rufus' time; still the ravens croak and buzzards sail above Dunkery; peregrines still trouble the wood-pigeons round Minehead and Porlock; badgers live snug in their earths in the cliffs; stoats and weasels harry the mice and voles in deserted coombes running up from the

sea. All these, like their mother the moor, live a life apart from man, and, like her, reck nothing of his joys and sorrows, but go on their own ways unchanged, from generation to generation.

CHAPTER IX

BIRD SONG

In this country, where most of our birds are sombre in plumage, it is usually by their songs that our attention is drawn to them. True, the kingfisher's cobalt and emerald livery may flash upon us as it wings its headlong flight over river or mere, but it is only in a bright light that its lustre attains complete beauty; and only under these conditions do the patches of azure on the jay's shoulder and the violet and green reflections on the magpie's wings strike the eye. The golden oriole would be a brilliant object were it ever allowed to establish itself here, but 'sportsmen,' working on the principle of 'There's a strange bird, let's shoot it,' and the tribe of jackdaw-collectors, ensure its rarity. Goldfinches' glittering wings show up amid crimson thistle crowns, and the white rump of the wheatear flickers as it flies across the sand dunes, or a sweep of purple heather. The gulls, in whose plumage white predominates, attract attention through the eye as much as through the ear. But, generally speaking, British birds are inconspicuous.

So much has been written about bird song that it may seem impertinent to add to the existing literature. But every field naturalist gleans a few fresh facts, here a little and there a little; also, the appeal made by song to different temperaments has an

infinite variety. A dozen individuals may listen to a nightingale, but the effect upon their respective emotions will not be the same; to the Cockney the music may be simply 'a sparrer 'ollering'; for the poet it hints at strains even more lovely; to him 'heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter'; the musician marvels at those *bravura* passages which defeat musical notation; to the bird-lover it is a never-ending wonder and delight. Yet all these diverse impressions have their interest.

Theories as to the origin of bird song are many. As Professor J. Arthur Thomson has pointed out, there is no voice among invertebrates; the instrumental music of insects is mechanical. The grasshopper produces its cheerful noise by rubbing certain knobs on its hind-legs against a portion of his upper wings. The 'chirrup' of locusts and crickets arises from friction. To quote Professor Thomson, 'birds inherited their voice from their reptilian ancestors, and have reinvested this legacy.' Doubtless call notes, the signals by means of which one bird communicates with another, are the source from which bird song has evolved. Some of these are obviously hereditary and instinctive. They are (e.g. in the case of the lapwing) uttered by young birds while still in the egg. The songs of some of the British species have not even now progressed much beyond a repetition of such notes; that of the goldcrest, for instance, is simply its call reiterated. The

tree-creeper's ditty, a thin quavering pipe, is founded on its feeble call, 'tsee, tsee,' though it is true that there are added embellishments. The cirl-bunting and the corn-crake afford further instances of songs which consist of a succession of simple notes.

The similarity of call and alarm notes in birds belonging to the same species argues a common origin. The wood warbler, when one is near the nest, utters a note which is more plaintive than that of the chiff-chaff, whose protest under similar circumstances is, again, more peevish than that of the willow wren. The common whitethroat greets your presence with a churr which is obviously a curse; the lesser whitethroat's 'tchik' is a more feminine expletive, a 'sarcenet' oath, such as Hotspur bade his lady leave 'to velvet guards and Sunday-citizens.' But all these warbler call notes are similar in type. The objurgations of the crow tribe have a distinct family resemblance: their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness, but the raven's curse is deeper and more awesome than the hoarse imprecation of the carrion crow; the raven, when he swears, does it like a gentleman: his cousin's remarks recall a Thames bargee or an habitué of Billingsgate. The rook's caw has sweet reasonableness in it compared with the notes of either crow or raven; as for jackdaw, jay and magpie, there is a comic element in their villainous jargon; they will never make your flesh creep as a raven can; but their remarks are distinctly corvine.

Again, there is an affinity between the calls of chaffinch and brambling. The screams of peregrine and merlin are also very similar, though the merlin's is more shrill: a kestrel's 'kee kee,' though less virulent, bespeaks its consanguinity with both. The call notes of the buntings – corn, yellow and cirl – resemble each other closely. It is hardly necessary to comment on the likeness between the angry chatter of the thrushes – blackbird, song and mistle-thrush, ring-ousel, and fieldfare. The redwing's note, though softer, is still specifically thrush-like. The conversation of the tits, though bewildering, is all in the dialect of their clan.

The same likeness also appears in songs of birds of the same or nearly allied families, though, as song marks a higher stage of evolution, there is usually here a greater divergence. But even the songs of cirl-bunting and yellow-hammer are very alike; when the latter omits the 'cheese' ending it is often difficult to be sure which is which. To one good observer the cirl's notes sound more distinct, but, in fact, the *tempo* of his phrase is varied; most cirl-buntings known to me inhabit Somerset, where we do not believe in indecent haste, and it may be that they have unconsciously assimilated the charming but easy-going ways of the Wessex folk. Most of the warblers have songs which approximate to each other both in theme and method of delivery. The rapid, rippling passages which make up the music of

blackcap and garden warbler are so alike that it sometimes puzzles even an expert to say at once to which bird he is listening; the shrill crescendo which ends the blackcap's carol usually puts his identity beyond all doubt, even if he is invisible, but occasionally one meets with a garden warbler whose pitch and *timbre* make one hesitate until one has got a view of him. The songs of the whitethroats, common and lesser, have a marked cousinly connection: both clearly belong to the warbler family; in fact, the low warble of the latter – a clarinet solo *molto piano* – sounds very like the garden warbler's flute. I once heard an American say, in praise of his wife's proficiency in French, 'I guess she sputters it at 'em pretty quick.' The same might be said of the whitethroats: they babble confusedly. To parody Dryden: –

'The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
But whitethroats never deviate into sense.'

But in his well-known 'rattle' note the lesser whitethroat is curiously unlike a warbler; it is nearer to chaffinch or cirl-bunting music; indeed, when this bunting and a lesser whitethroat were both giving tongue in my garden one summer, I had to listen very carefully in order to separate them. Sedge and reed warblers, too, chuckle in distinctly warbler modes, though the reed bird's small talk is more liquid and mellifluous than the sedge's chatter; both

play reed instruments, but the one prefers the *cor anglais* and the other a miniature and etherealized bassoon.

The songs of the various members of the thrush clan, though they vary far more than do their respective call notes, show an obvious cousinship. If the throstle is the most brilliant performer of this group – his art is that of a *virtuoso* – the blackbird, to many ears, tunes a sweeter, simpler melody; one might call him a naïve folk-song singer. The storm-cock's rather monotonous strains are a connecting-link between the two, while the ring-ousel trolls a robustious ballad such as one would expect from the throat of a blackbird who has deserted the copses and lush meadows of the plain for stark tors and lonely moorland spaces.

The 'territorial' theory of bird song has been worked out exhaustively by Mr. H. Eliot Howard. 'Song' (he says) 'in its full development, belongs . . . to the season of reproduction; it is heard at the dawn of the seasonal sexual process, and is the most conspicuous outward manifestation of the internal organic changes which ultimately lead to reproduction. . . . The male, whilst travelling to its breeding-grounds, and even after its arrival, whilst in search of a territory, sings but little. Yet when a suitable territory is eventually secured . . . it . . . advertises its presence by a song uttered with such perseverance as to suggest that the end is at length

attained. Hence . . . the instinct of song seems to be related to the establishment of a territory.' By song, the male announces his presence to and attracts the female. This idea is beautifully expressed in Walt Whitman's well-known poem – though there the 'he-bird' was calling in vain for his dead mate.

'Loud! loud! loud!
High and clear I shoot my voice over the waves;
Surely you must know who is here, is here;
You must know who I am, my love.'

And, of course, 'territorial' song also acts as a warning to other males that the singer has pegged out his claim and that 'trespassers will be prosecuted' after the avian fashion, with beak and claws.

Song among birds, is, of course, mainly the prerogative of the male sex. A careful observer has recorded that the female robin occasionally sings, and I myself have heard and seen hen woodlarks and blackcaps pipe a few notes, but, so far as our present knowledge goes, these are exceptions.

The influence of imitation or mimicry in the evolution of bird song was discussed in great detail and with a wealth of examples by the late Mr. C. A. Witchell in his book, *The Evolution of Bird Song*. He gives many instances of caged birds imitating the songs of other species, and records similar characteristics in the songs of wild birds.

One may doubt whether the imitations by caged birds of the songs of others confined near them are of much value in determining how far imitation affects the origin of bird song. Birds in a cage are not in their natural surroundings, and the presence of other prisoners gives them opportunities of copying songs with which they would not otherwise become acquainted. But some species are well-known mimics, even when living their natural lives in the wild. W. H. Hudson, in his *Adventures Among Birds*, has a charming chapter on 'The Marsh Warbler's Music.' 'Listening to the marsh warbler at some distance,' he writes, 'it seemed to me at first that he sang his own song interspersed with imitations, that the borrowed songs and phrases were selections which accorded best with his own notes, so that the whole performance was like some ever-varying melody. On closer acquaintance, I found that the performance was mainly or nearly all imitations in which the loud, harsh and guttural sounds were subdued and softened – that the mocker's native, silvery sweetness had in some degree been imparted to all of them.' He goes on to enumerate over twenty species whose songs and calls he recognized in the marsh warbler's song. A certain type of ornithologist has, of late, begun to decry Hudson's knowledge of British birds. If anyone compares his chapter on the marsh warbler with some purely scientific description of the same species,

he will, I am sure, gain from this 'ignorant' writer an intimate knowledge of the real bird for which he will look in vain in the scientific essay. Hudson's birds live for us because he loved them alive, not dead.

The sedge warbler is also a well-known mimic. One to which I listened for ten minutes last summer introduced into his song the scold of the common wren, the chitter of the house-sparrow, portions of skylark's carol, the call notes of the brown linnet and dunnock, the shake of the nightingale, the alarm note of the swallow, the chaffinch's 'spink,' and the 'tchink, tchink' of a blackbird which thinks it has seen a ghost at dusk. All these birds were quite common in the neighbourhood; in fact, a nightingale was singing intermittently from the copse on whose border the sedge warbler was performing.

Starlings, too, are accomplished ventriloquists. One in my garden constantly imitated the blackbird's song: another would occasionally hoot like a brown owl. The curlew's weird, wild whistle evidently appeals to this species; I have on several occasions heard starlings reproduce it. The 'tchack' of the jackdaw, the mad laughter of the yaffle, the spring call of the lapwing, they can copy to perfection. When living in a part of Cheshire where the buzzard is practically unknown, I was surprised one morning to hear its peevish 'pee-ou' from an oak some thirty yards away. A starling had imitated it to the life. On another occasion, this clown among

birds again made a fool of me. The common sandpiper is a migrant which reaches Cheshire about the middle of April. I was, therefore, puzzled to hear its call from my bedroom window so early as the 22nd of February, until I saw a particularly roguish 'shepster' (to use its Cheshire name) gurgling and chuckling from the top of a chimney near by, enjoying the joke it had played upon my too credulous self.

The blackbird is less famous as a mimetic artist, though Witchell records his imitation of the crowing of a barn-door cock and the cries of some dozen other species. One May evening I heard a green woodpecker's laugh in an elm in front of me: I raised my field-glasses, hoping to catch a glimpse of this ever-attractive humourist, but I could see only a blackbird; as I admired his glistening black plumage, I was amazed to see him throw back his head and give vent to a perfect peal of yaffle laughter, ending, however, in his own inconsequential cadence. Soon he flew farther off, and, in the distance, repeated the joke to his friends. I had before this heard what I thought was a green woodpecker near the spot, but I am wondering now how often this ouzel-cock may have deceived me.

The song-thrush's imitative bent is better known. Witchell listened to fifty thrushes in fourteen months, and heard eleven hundred and twenty phrases 'which seemingly contained some recog-

nizable imitations.' A song-thrush singing in the same thicket as a nightingale last June copied the 'foreign singer's' throbbing trill so well that it was puzzling to decide which bird was singing; in his attempts to emulate that long-drawn, low, plaintive wail of the nightingale – a phrase which, to my mind, puts him in a class by himself among British songsters – the thrush was less successful; his note was higher in pitch, and, perhaps, for that reason, failed quite to convince. Another thrush, in a Cheshire wood, constantly introduced into his song the 'bubble' note of the hen cuckoo. I have heard one suddenly shout the curlew's danger cry, which sounds like 'pereèk.' A chaffinch will utter the nuthatch's well-known whistle as a prelude to his song, and a robin intersperse the common whitethroat's chuckle among his own melodies. I have also noticed affinities in the songs of some common redstarts to those of chaffinch, blackbird and redbreast, and I have heard a robin imitate the call of a cock redstart and the song of the common whitethroat. The young buzzard has a cry which is so like a rabbit caught in a trap that I have been quite deceived: indeed, I was going into a copse to look for the rabbit, when suddenly the buzzard flew over my head, crying, and showed me my error.

Witchell, rather tentatively, asks whether it is not possible that many wild birds have unconsciously learnt to imitate sounds persistent in their neighbour-

hood, and that these sounds have been, partly by filial mimicry, partly by voluntary imitation, gradually reproduced in their songs. He points out that several birds of the duck family, for instance, the sheld-duck and widgeon, have whistling cries; and so has the whooper swan: the sound of its wings can be heard at some distance; birds accustomed to long flights and to a life in lonely places, would, he thought, observe sounds caused by flight, especially at the times of migration. He alludes to the likeness of the cries of owls to the moaning of the wind in the hollow trees which they frequent. Robins, wrens, dunnocks, blackbirds and blackcaps might, he surmised, have acquired their music partly through the influence of the murmurs of rippling streams.

Every field naturalist must often have noticed this resemblance of bird song to elemental sounds. The song of the goldfinch is like golden rain falling upon smooth waters; and some of the brown linnet's notes suggest the same imagery, only his, perhaps, are silver rather than gold. The whinchat's delicate warble has the same delightful 'rain-drop' quality; Hudson described the song as 'a mere drop of sound, yet to all other bird sounds about it like a drop of dew or rain among many other crystal, colourless drops, which catches the light at the right angle and shines with loveliest colour.'

The dipper spends as much of his time in the water as on land or in the air; it is not wonderful to

find that his song is such a perfect imitation of the rippling, gurgling chatter of the swift-flowing mountain rills which he loves; and, at times, his song is almost as unintermittent as the brook's, which goes on for ever; I have heard one sing without perceptible pause for three minutes on end. The grasshopper warbler, of course, takes his name from the similarity of his song to that of the insect. Witchell points out that the young of this species, and also of the yellow- and cirl-buntings, have ample opportunity, during their infancy, of hearing the notes of grasshoppers and crickets, and suggested that their songs might be imitations of these cheerful chirrupings. The alarm notes of stonechat and wheatear resemble the sound made by one stone striking another; both these birds inhabit places where

'The stones falling,
Fill empty gorge on gorge with echoes calling.'

The 'scape' of the common snipe has often reminded me of the sound made by one's shoe-heels as one withdraws them from a bog; the hoofs of cattle reproduce this sound in similar circumstances.

Witchell also studied the subject of musical phrases in the songs of birds. It is, he says, easy to record 'the intervals expressed in limited cries, though, of course, with only approximate accuracy, for the birds have no knowledge of our scale of music.' Whether it might be possible to score bird

song more precisely if one were acquainted with Indian music, which has twenty-two intervals in its octave, I cannot say; Mr. W. H. Davies' mariner told how the strange Chinese, another Oriental race, 'conversed much as our homely blackbirds sing'; but he was 'a damn bad sailor and a landshark too': hardly a reliable witness! Witchell recognized the impossibility, in the case of birds which sing long, rapid passages, of setting down their songs in musical notation, but he did capture musical phrases in the songs of several species, and as many as seventy-six in those of thirty different blackbirds. But it must be confessed that some of the phrases convey very little bird melody to the ear when played on piano or violin. Figuratively, one may liken birds' notes to various instruments of music, but I know of none which really attains the peculiar *timbre* of avian voices, though the 'gentle-sounding flute' is capable of giving some bird notes with considerable verisimilitude.

The difficulty of reproducing their songs in terms of human speech is equally unsurmountable. It is significant that few British birds are named from their songs or calls. True, the cuckoo does say 'cuckoo' unmistakably, and the lapwing 'peewit'; 'u-tick,' the Cheshire name for whinchat, is exactly its alarm note. One could recognize the chiff-chaff from his oft-repeated solo on two notes, but I can hear very little 'ch' in them. Translations of bird music into human

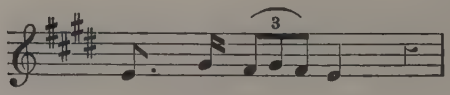
language are, in only a few instances, satisfactory, and this is not strange when one remembers that birds do not produce sounds in the larynx, but in a special organ, the syrinx. I recognized the quail's call the first time I heard it, as 'wet-my-lips' or 'wet-my-feet,' which is perhaps nearer the original. The ring-dove's 'Take *two* cows, David, take' is certainly very happy, much more so, to my ear, than the alleged 'little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese' of the yellow-hammer, which makes considerable demands on the imagination; and so does 'in-another-month-will-come-a-wheatear' for the chaffinch's song. An Artois peasant rendered it to a friend of mine as 'J'avais ung tout p'tit, p'tit, p'tit catiaou (chateau'); quite a good interpretation, but French patois is more plastic than English.

Witchell thought that birds such as the thrush and blackbird had acquired their musical passages by imitation during their age-long association with the human race in fields, villages and country towns. But, as W. H. Hudson pointed out when commenting on this theory, 'some of our song birds are imitative in a much higher degree than the blackbird, yet never come near to human music in their songs.' He believed that the blackbird sang such phrases naturally because it is his nature to. 'He throws out his notes anyhow, until in this haphazard way he hits on a sequence of notes, or phrase, that pleases him, and practises it with variations. Finally, he may

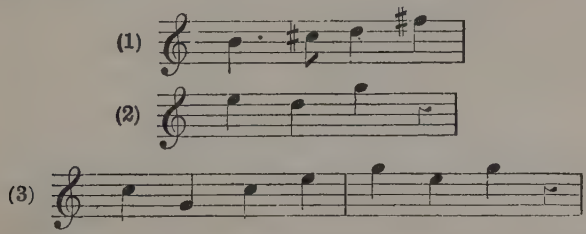
get fond of it, and go on repeating it for days and weeks. Every individual singer is, so to speak, his own composer.' He goes on to recall, 'a blackbird of genius' he once heard in the New Forest. 'This bird did not repeat a strain with some slight variation . . . but sang differently every time, or varied the strain so greatly as to make it appear like a new melody on each repetition, yet every one of its strains could have been set down in musical notation. . . . No person . . . could believe that these strains were borrowed. They were too many, and they came as spontaneously as water gushing from a rock.'

I believe that Hudson was right. It is true that some of Witchell's collected blackbird phrases are 'musical' to our ears; (many of them are very like bugle calls, which, fluted by a blackbird, could summon only elfin hosts;) and he also records a starling imitating a parrot that whistled the four notes of the common chord; yet, for all that, it is a comparatively rare thing to hear wild birds sing a phrase which is a recognizable imitation of man-made melody.

I have notes of a good many musical phrases heard in bird songs, but the only one which approaches a 'tune' is this crow of a barn-door cock: –



The notes are the same as the opening bar of a dance tune popular in the early days of this century. As this rooster crew outside a lonely cottage on the borders of Exmoor a year or two ago, the possibility of imitation is unlikely. The following are phrases from blackbird songs heard by me: –



Number one occasionally repeated the initial B natural at the end of the phrase, but this was usually omitted. The second bird sometimes sang the three notes in the middle of a long 'unmusical' passage, and sometimes separately.

The third phrase was like a post-horn, and reminded one of Witchell's 'bugle-call' blackbirds. All three birds were evidently fond of their little bit of melody and repeated it often, but the *motifs* sounded inconsequential, as all blackbirds' songs do, and, after listening to them, the impression they left was that the singer had hit upon them by accident rather than by imitation. The same was the case with a musical phrase which I heard often repeated in the song of a mistle-thrush.

It seems possible that both the 'territorial' and

'imitative' theories of the origin and evolution of bird song are sound, in so far that both have played their part. But, whatever may be their history, there can be no doubt that their songs to-day are always the result of heightened emotion. This may arise from various causes, or a combination of several, but evidently the sex impulse is the strongest. The physical changes which take place in birds as the breeding-season approaches makes them 'renew their old melodious madrigals of Love'; at this season, if it be true that every flower enjoys the air it breathes, it is equally certain that every bird enjoys the song it sings. The strains that charm us are ecstatic lyrics; birds, like poets, sing 'because they must and not because they will.' The song of both is an imperfect effort to attain the unattainable, to express that 'something more' which cannot be told in words or music. Though the bird may not know it, this is the impulse that controls the evolution of his own and all other poetry. If the nightingale sang to Neanderthal man we may surmise it was a less perfect lyric than that which he sings to us to-day. Perhaps the song which found a path 'through the sad heart of Ruth' was not 'the self-same song' which Keats heard that memorable night at Hampstead, but some simpler melody.

With some birds it seems that this exuberance of joy can only be expressed by flight and song in combination: the skylark and woodlark are obvious

instances, though both these also sing when stationary: tree- and meadow-pipits descend in giddy spirals as they sing; whitethroats toss themselves deliriously aloft and bubble over; the redshank literally dances in the air as he trills his love melody. Others, who normally sing from a perch, such as song-thrush, blackbird, chaffinch and mistle-thrush, at this time cannot restrain their music even when on the wing. Some, darkness itself cannot silence: sedge warblers, nightingales and corncrakes are well-known night singers, but I have also heard the wren shatter the silence of a June midnight with irrepressible music.

Gradually, as the sex impulse gives way to the cares of a family, the choral symphony fades and wanes. The singers are fewer, and those who still gladden us have lost their verve. The glory has departed; even the throstle cannot now 'recapture his first fine careless rapture'; the willow wren will warble on a sunny September morning, but it is a farewell song before his long journey southwards; in August the reed warbler sings slowly and disjointedly, as though it were an effort; his voice is huskier and more squeaky; it recalls the rustling of brown reeds when 'the sedge has wither'd from the lake, and no birds sing.' Soon the cirl-bunting, that persistent optimist who stutters his staccato throughout the hottest August days, is the only bird voice left. The shortness of song's duration is one of the

tragedies of a bird-lover's life! Never comes mid-June without regret that the few short weeks when song is at its zenith are over, and that fuller use has not been made of the opportunity to let bird-music saturate the mind.

In autumn, though our migrant visitors have left or are leaving us, there is a short revival, which, though it never attains to such a pitch of ecstasy as in the summer festival, has moments of great beauty. The woodlark's renewed song in September vies even with his spring exultations; the robin in October attunes his note delightfully to 'mists and mellow fruitfulness' and the patter of golden leaves as they fall. But, even in winter, bird song never dies. I have heard the songs of cirl-bunting, song-thrush, stormcock and woodlark, and the laughter of the yaffle, in every month of the year. Even in November, the dabchick whinnies cheerfully; I have known the ring-dove suggest cattle stealing to David in December; wrens, robins, and occasionally blackbirds, are winter singers, and so is the dipper. Chaffinches begin again in late January, and early February turns the thoughts of the yellow-hammer to bread and no cheese. This winter music depends largely, of course, upon weather conditions. High wind with low temperature silences most singers; cloud seems to depress others, but many birds sing in the rain; calm, bright days always make some feathered optimist think that spring is here.

The fact that birds sing after the breeding-time is over shows clearly enough that love is not the only well-spring from which their song arises; what these other emotions may be, is bound to be largely a matter of supposition. Besides weather conditions and a plentiful supply of food, alarm is a powerful song stimulus: I once saw a kestrel stoop at a skylark; the hawk missed its quarry by a fraction of an inch; immediately the skylark soared up and burst into full song. A fisherman friend once saw a hawk attack a dipper, which fell, partly stunned, into the water. He scared off the hawk, and the dipper floated downstream till it came to a stone, when it crawled out, gradually recovered, and finally broke into music. It is, of course, possible that the stimulus in both these cases may have been relief from danger. Birds which are good singers are volatile in temperament, and therefore likely to be easily influenced by environment; in fact, to possess in some measure the æsthetic sense; hence they respond readily in song to any stimulus, pleasurable or otherwise; a stone thrown into a reed-bed makes all the sedge and reed warblers hysterical; 'when the little heart is big, a little sets it off.'

It would be interesting to discover, by a plebiscite of bird lovers, which was their favourite song. I suppose that where the nightingale is well known he would be universally given the first place: I should plump for him; no British songster can match a good

nightingale in richness and variety. But all nightingales do not sing equally well; and a fine song-thrush may run an indifferent nightingale very close. W. H. Hudson, writing to me soon after his *Adventures Among Birds* had been published, said that the book had brought him an astonishing number of letters from all parts of the country, and most of the writers declared that the blackbird was their favourite songster. Before I had heard the woodlark sing, I think I should have placed the blackbird second after the nightingale, but now, knowing and loving the woodlark's musical powers so well, the blackbird must yield precedence to him. Probably our referendum would reveal some strange choices, but I can well imagine that some might give second, or even first, place to blackcap, garden warbler, song-thrush, woodlark or skylark. John Burroughs, the American naturalist, apparently put the willow warbler very high in the scale. 'The song of the willow warbler,' he wrote, 'has a dying fall: no other bird song is so touching in this respect. It mounts up round and full, then runs down the scale and expires upon the air in a gentle murmur.'

All bird lovers must have memories of bird song heard under ideal conditions, say, at dawn or sunset or amid exquisite scenery; or when, for no discernible reason, except, perhaps, that one's digestion was in perfect order, the mind was exceptionally receptive. On such occasions, the listener is inclined to

ask, with Walt Whitman, 'Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? Or is it mostly to me?' I have rare memories of the marvellous burst of song at dawn in spring or early summer. One such chorus, to which I listened just on the borders of a Cheshire copse, was so bewildering in its fullness that it was hardly possible to distinguish the strains of individual singers. In fact, one ceased to attempt it, but passively allowed pure music to sink into one's brain. Another such symphony I heard on the outskirts of a village; the throstle started the opening theme; then blackbirds, with flute and oboe, suggested the second subject; this set off the whole orchestra, in which song- and mistle-thrush, blackbird, chaffinch and yellow-hammer combined. Unfortunately, this awoke the house-sparrows, with their banderlog chatter, as irritating as the conversation of cads throughout a Beethoven concerto; but it was persistent, and, after some ten minutes, the musicians gave up the attempt in disgust, and left the field to them. Only the yellow-hammer continued to perform imperturbably.

Or, perhaps, the memory may be of the song of some new singer, or one heard unexpectedly, or with some rare touch of beauty. Once in mid-winter and again in early autumn I have heard the low warble of the redwing, though he sings but little in this country, and then usually just before his departure. A morning in April is memorable to me because I

then heard for the first time a flock of at least five hundred bramblings make the beech boles throb with the shrill 'cree' call of the male birds, as they sought their food among the golden leaf carpet. Or I would picture to you another April noon, with half a dozen brown linnets, in a patch of gorse so brilliant that it paled the yellow-hammer's breast, scattering love notes upon the mild air; and this beneath a sky of clear and unfathomable blue. Once, in a Welsh valley, there came to me from among beeches almost more yellow than green in their spring livery, the laugh of the yaffle; and then another mocked him with merriment so faint that it seemed like an echo, a ghost of the call of the first bird. One day my wife and I listened to three cuckoos singing together: one sang a major, one a minor third, and another a perfect fourth. Two of these were calling at a different pitch, the one much higher than the other, so that the 'coo' of the tenor cuckoo was the same note as the 'cuck' of the bass!

I will end with a comment upon the statement, which one finds almost invariably in books on birds, that the nightingale ceases singing when the young are hatched. It is at least as old as Bewick. A year or two ago I was watching a pair of nightingales feeding four nestlings about a week old. I heard the cock's well-known notes while I was approaching, and, as I watched, on several occasions he sang before going to the nest with food. His warbling was not so

continuous as it is earlier in the season, but the throb and trill passages were there. Since then I have twice noticed cock nightingales singing while feeding young. It may be that the statement is generally correct: but I cannot help wondering whether at any rate some modern writers on birds have not simply copied it from older authors without having taken the trouble to test its truth for themselves. The field naturalist has corrected many errors of arm-chair oracles, and the tally is not yet complete.

CHAPTER X

BIRDS IN CAPTIVITY

The keeping of birds in captivity is a subject which has always aroused controversy. Bird-fanciers vehemently maintain that their captives are well-fed and healthy; that they enjoy longer lives than they would do in their natural state, and that their songs prove that they are happy. Some field naturalists, at any rate, while admitting that many cage birds are well-tended, know from experience that many others are shamefully and cruelly neglected, and doubt whether any bird in confinement, however humanely kept, is as happy as he would be if in his natural surroundings and in enjoyment of liberty. The question is difficult, because we know so little of the mind of a bird.

> Birds, companions more unknown,
> Live beside us, but alone; . . .
> Still, beneath their feathered breast
> Stirs a history unexpressed.
> Wishes there, and feelings strong,
> Incommunicably throng;
> What they want we cannot guess,
> Fail to track their deep distress.

Thus wrote Matthew Arnold of 'Poor Matthias.'

Not long since I heard one of our most famous authorities on animal psychology lecture on 'What

is meant by instinct' – a subject which carries us into unplumbed depths in the boundless ocean of psychology. 'Instinct,' 'intelligence,' and 'reason' have in the past caused great controversies among animal psychologists. There has been much spilling of brains, and there will be, no doubt, in the future. The difficulty has always been to define precisely what is meant by these terms, and, having done so, to decide to which category a particular action should be attributed. The dividing line is always a delicate one, and, in some cases, discrimination is difficult, if not impossible. The lecturer cleared the air a good deal by suggesting that the comparatively new science of behaviourism might afford a possible solution. The actions of animals might, he said, be divided into primary, secondary, and tertiary behaviour. By employing these terms we should avoid the confusion which follows from the use of 'instinct.' This word, apart from its popular meaning, has been defined so differently by animal psychologists that, according to some, it covers practically all animal behaviour, while others have restricted it to actions performed in such circumstances that they cannot have been learned, and are, therefore, inherited; for instance, a greenfinch, taken from the nest and kept in captivity apart from all other greenfinches, was observed to build a first nest precisely similar to that constructed by wild greenfinches.

Primary behaviour would, roughly, cover actions

which are 'instinctive' in this narrower sense. Secondary behaviour would include what was formerly comprised under 'intelligence': i.e., actions which are the result of experience. Tertiary behaviour, in the same way, is practically synonymous with 'reason,' using the word in the older sense to describe actions which seem to denote in the animal the power to grasp a plan. Bird behaviour is, for the most part, primary; some of it is almost certainly secondary; it may be that the crow tribe, and perhaps the parrots, rise sometimes to behaviour which is worthy to be styled tertiary. Some of the higher animals almost certainly attain to these heights. But it is obvious from the above that the mind of birds is very different from ours, and we must beware of giving too humanistic an interpretation to their behaviour. For instance, it does not necessarily follow that because a caged bird sings it is happy. 'We think caged birds sing, when indeed they cry.' There is food for thought in Webster's line. Song in birds is the expression of emotion. Often, of course, the emotion is happiness, but not always; it may connote rivalry, or even fear. Cock woodlarks, when fighting, intersperse their bouts with snatches of martial music. Their song gives voice to anger. I have mentioned in another chapter that a bird will break into song when it has just escaped a hawk's attack: song in such a case may mean alarm or a release of pent-up emotions.

The question of the comparative longevity of wild and captive birds cannot be definitely decided on the evidence before us, from the simple fact that we do not know enough about the age of wild birds. Most ringed birds which are recovered appear to live not more than a few years, but there are rather more than a score of recorded instances of wild birds surviving for ten years after they were ringed. These records, compared with the ages of birds of the same species kept in confinement, seem to show that captive birds live on the average longer. (See *British Birds*, Vol. XX pp. 71–3.) But the percentage of ringed birds recovered is very small, except in a few species, and it is quite possible that the ones which are never heard of again are those which have the strength and intelligence necessary to enable them to elude capture or death, whether by trap, accident, or shot-gun, and are therefore likely to enjoy longer life. And, even if it were proved that all caged birds lived longer than wild ones, who would not prefer a year in freedom to ten in a prison?

Many keepers of caged birds no doubt love and are kind to their captives. But, whatever doubt we may feel as to the happiness of cage-birds when properly tended, there can be none whatever as to the miserable lot of those which, either from the ignorance or callousness of their keepers, are ill-treated or neglected. *Bird Notes and News*, the journal of the Royal Society for the Protection of

Birds, publishes regularly particulars of such cases. Some of them were shocking. We read of linnets and goldfinches confined in cages so small that the birds cannot even stretch their wings; some dirty, some tailless, the feathers worn away by rubbing them against the bars; of larks 'in a miserable condition, with wings badly bruised'; of three linnets in cages 'so small that the birds were ragged and almost tailless.' There have also been revolting cases of cruelty to 'braced' birds, used as decoys to catch wild birds. A recent Act has fortunately made it illegal to use braced birds, or to confine a bird in a cage not sufficient to allow the prisoner freely to stretch its wings and exercise itself, so we may hope that now these barbarous practices will disappear.

Again, there is the terrible mortality among birds captured by bird-catchers. In his evidence before the Committee on the Protection of Wild Birds the Solicitor to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals stated that the mortality among freshly caught goldfinches was fifty per cent., and that, in fact, the majority of goldfinches die within a few days of capture. It is true that other witnesses estimated the mortality at from five to fifteen per cent., but, in their report, the Committee stated that the mortality was undoubtedly very high. These things would not happen, at any rate, to so great an extent, if there were no demand for caged birds,

and those who keep them cannot hold themselves entirely guiltless on this account, however kindly they may treat their captives.

To many of us a bird attains its highest beauty only when in its natural surroundings. What a wild thing loves most is liberty; what it fears most is restraint. If caged birds really love their cages, why shut the doors at all? I understand that a few 'bird fanciers' do open their cage doors by day and that the birds come back to them at night. No one can object to this, of course, but I wish the practice were more general. When this subject was being discussed in a daily paper not long ago an anonymous correspondent quoted the following lines of Chaucer's (from the Manciple's Tale):

'Tak any brid, and put it in a cage,
And do al thyn entente, and thy corage,
To fostre it tendrely, with mete and drinke
Of alle deintees that thou canst bithinke,
And kepe it al so clenely as thou may;
Although his cage of gold be never so gay,
Yet hath this brid, by twenty thousand fold
Lever in forest that is rude and cold
Gon ete wormes, and swich wretchednesse.
For ever this brid wol doon his besinesse
To escape out of his cage, if he may:
His liberty this brid desireth ay.'

Apparently, even in these enlightened times, some

people have not progressed as far as Chaucer, who lived in the 'barbarous' Middle Ages.

It is useless to ask which alternative the bird itself would choose, if its elementary mind were capable of envisaging all the reasons for and against. Birds are creatures of impulse; they live only in the present. But if anyone doubts whether a bird is happier caged or free, let him go into the country when the spring is throbbing, and watch the birds for an hour or two. Let him mark their manifold little excitements and activities, their songs, their varied selection of food, their playful antics, their courtship, their love displays, their nest building, their delight in sunshine and rain, and, most of all, their exultation in untrammelled flight. Even with our limited knowledge of bird psychology we can see clearly enough that the wild birds are happy in their natural freedom. And then let him go back and look at his caged goldfinches, however well-loved and well-fed, captive, deprived of free flight, and in unnatural surroundings. Happy? Are they? Which of us would choose, for ourselves or for another, a longer life of pampered captivity rather than a short life of freedom? And which would a bird, if its little mind could consider all the alternatives, choose for itself? For my own part I agree with the late W. H. Hudson, 'I should open the cage and let them fly away. Even to death I should let them fly, for there would be a taste of liberty first, and life without

that sweet savour, whether of aerial bird or earth-bound man, is not worth living.'

It will be appreciated by the reader that what I have written applies to wild birds only, and not to those born in captivity, though they obviously have an instinctive desire for the untrammelled flight of which they are deprived, even in the roomiest aviary. And deprivation of flight is, of course, not felt by those birds, who in the course of ages, have lost this faculty, but even they in captivity are deprived of liberty. Of course, I recognize also the interest of wild birds confined for scientific observation; but the liability of such confinement to abuse at the hands of the cruel, the ignorant or the callous (as shown by the instances quoted above), makes clear the necessity for its careful and critical supervision.

For me, the pleasure experienced in watching a bird is always minimized by its confinement, and particularly is this so in the case of the eagles and hawks: when one has watched these birds in a wild state, and admired how they revel in their splendid powers of flight, to see them confined, arouses in one's conscience a feeling of melancholy and misgiving.

My sole experience of keeping a bird in captivity only served to strengthen my distaste for the practice. This is the tale of Gilbert the kestrel:

He was a miserable bundle of feathers when I saw him first; a farmer brought him to me, cooped up

in a basket which only just gave him room to stand upright; the farm dog had caught him, winged by a chance shot. There was blood on the bright buff feathers of his breast, and one eye was half closed. I thought he would probably be dead by morning; however, I took him to my empty greenhouse and released him; it was evident that he was ravenously hungry, for he took bits of raw meat from my fingers quite readily (he had refused with astonishment and contempt a well-meant offering of grains of rice and dry bread-crumbs from another hand!). His meal concluded, he buried his head in his feathers, and we left him, with a saucer full of water, for the night, and hoped for the best.

In the morning he looked a little more sprightly; the contents of the saucer were perceptibly less; and a few scraps of meat which I had left near him had disappeared. But he was still pretty sorry for himself; his left eye was still only half open, one wing seemed to be useless, and he spent his time in running to and fro upon the earth, to the great bedragglement of his tail feathers, and the even greater discomfiture of certain small flower-pots and seedlings. He was a cock bird in good plumage; his shoulders and wings were a beautiful tawny chestnut, spotted with eyots of black; his breast and throat buff, streaked longitudinally with black, and his blue-grey tail tipped with white, with a black bar across it; but it was the proud and fearless

carriage of his small grey-capped head, his hooked beak, and, most of all, his wonderful brown-black eye, wild and imperious, that proclaimed him a true falcon. As we watched him, crouching with shoulders raised over a gobbet of raw meat, tearing it ruthlessly to morsels, and glaring defiantly between each mouthful, we felt that although misfortune had made us masters of his body his spirit was still untrammelled; it soared above the narrow limits of his temporary prison.

During the next week he gained in strength and comeliness; the injured eye mended in a day or two, and he would perch on the remains of the trained tomato plants, make short flights, and flutter up the sides of the greenhouse. In fact, he seemed so much a convalescent, and so impatient of restraint after ten days' captivity, that we decided to release him. Confined in the cramping limits of his basket, he was conveyed to a field not far from the scene of his capture. When the lid was raised, he sprang out upon the green grass, looked fiercely round him for a moment, and then ran and fluttered for a little way. But obviously his wounded wing had not completely recovered, so, after a short chase, he was captured, protesting loudly. The greenhouse was cleared of obstructions, and perches erected for his convenience.

His diet did not cause any difficulty; his tastes were simple; raw, lean meat and liver, especially if

it was a bit gamey, suited his none too delicate palate. Fat he eschewed, and though he pecked at a green tomato, he did not continue his investigations. Once when the larder was low, we tried him with some raw fish, but he refused to be tempted, and, though it is recorded that the remains of earthworms have been found in kestrels' crops, he looked askance at such plebeian food. After ten days, he would perch on my hand to take his meals, and let me stroke his head. In feeding, he usually held the meat with the inner talons of his two feet while he tore it, but occasionally would grasp a smaller morsel with his left claw. It was astonishing to see how large a mouthful he would sometimes contrive to swallow; with his gape distended to its uttermost limit he would gasp and choke and gurgle until it disappeared; then with a wriggle of his shoulders and divers snakelike contortions of his neck and crop, he would settle the mouthful comfortably in his gizzard, scream quietly to himself for a few seconds, fluff out his feathers, cock his head knowingly on one side, and look expectantly for the next course.

Care and good feeding wrought a pleasing change in him; his well-preened plumage took on a sleek and well-groomed gloss; his eye was clear and keen; in fact, he looked so full of buck and *bonhomie* that we christened him 'Gilbert,' after the Filbert of glorious memory. But he never took kindly to captivity; while you were feeding him he tolerated

you, and even permitted such familiarities as the stroking of his poll or the insertion of a finger beneath his wing. But, dinner ended, his thoughts ran upon freedom and possible means of escape. Never, even at the end of his five weeks' convalescence, did he learn that though a kestrel might see through glass he could not fly through it; and so he spent many profitless hours in testing whether a pane of glass or his beak were the stronger, and in fluttering to and fro along the little ledge which topped the wall on which the greenhouse roof was stayed.

Increased powers of flight marked the stages of his convalescence. He could now rise from the ground, and fly from one end of the greenhouse to the other. So we decided to give him his freedom. An aluminium ring had been placed on his leg, and he was made to face the photographer, which he did with a very bad grace, turning his back to show his displeasure, and regarding the lens with deep suspicion and disapproval. Released from the basket on a cold, windy morning, he ran a few steps and then took wing strongly; he flew towards an oak some fifty yards away, but seemed to misjudge his distance in the gale, and, after attempting to alight, sailed over the next field, winnowing a few strokes as he hovered, then skimmed the next hedgerow, swooped to the left, and disappeared. That was our last glimpse of Gilbert. We wished him good hunting, and trusted

that his chequered experiences might make him more wary of shot guns in the future. To keep so beautiful and untamed a creature away from his native element longer than was necessary for his recovery was unthinkable. I had not at that time the leisure necessary to train him for falconry.

Here is another tale of an injured bird, who certainly did better when left alone than he would have done in confinement.

He was a young tawny owl. When we found him on the ground in a larch wood, he looked very sick indeed. Woodmen had been trimming the copse, and, apparently, had cut down the tree in which his nursery had been. The rather pathetic corpse of a younger brother or sister lay a few yards away. He himself was a small huddled heap of white down; two black, red-rimmed eyes and a hooked beak suggested Hebraic ancestry, so we christened him 'Moses' on the spot. A dead mouse, lying near him, showed that he was not entirely deserted, though we saw no signs of his parents. Bluebottles were crawling over him, and the sun was beating down on his head. We thoughtfully erected a booth of fresh-cut larch twigs over him, and, having eviscerated the mouse, to make it more tempting to an invalid's appetite, we left him, shaking our heads over his somewhat doubtful fate.

However, when we visited him, early next morning, he was much better. The mouse had dis-

appeared, and the remains of a fledgling hard by indicated that he had made a hearty breakfast. In the evening he was sitting up and looking quite perky, while his mother, a large tawny owl, in splendid plumage, was flitting about his end of the wood as we left. During the next few days he throve steadily. Feathers of a robin and a young blackbird, and fragments of rabbit, strewn round him, showed the tempting variety of the fare provided by his solicitous parent. He now snapped his beak at us aggressively when we approached, and, if we tried to handle him, turned on his side and presented his quite formidable claws to us.

Once, as I was bending down over him, I felt, rather than saw, a shadow pass over my head, and the old owl sailed into a tree near by, flattened herself against the trunk, and glared at me. In the evening before we left the district I paid a farewell visit to him. I saw the old owl eyeing me from her perch, some twenty yards distant, as I bent down to test how fat his ribs were getting. Suddenly, I felt a doughty buffet on the back of my head and left ear, and, looking up, saw the mother of Moses sailing away to another perch. I cannot have had my eye off her for more than a couple of seconds, but her flight was so noiseless that I heard not the slightest sound until her wing struck me. Ruminating on the ungratefulness of mothers, after our careful attention to their offspring, and rubbing my stinging ear, I

followed her round the wood till she returned to her original perch.

After an interval of nearly a week we paid Moses a final call. We found him increased in bulk and stature. In fact, he was so over-gorged and sleepy that he did not even trouble to snap his beak at us. The brown feathers were coming through his down, and his wing quills were developing fast. Rabbit fur was about in abundance, and he had evidently begun to cough up his own little pellets.

His mother was on guard as usual, but there were two of us, and though we bent down and stroked him, she made no hostile demonstration. When we stood beneath her perch she simply glared sleepily at us, and made no attempt to retreat. As we left the wood we saw her craning her head round a tree trunk to see us safely off the premises. I was a little thankful to be out in the light again without having my ears boxed. With such a good mother Moses no doubt thrived.

To face p. 192.] [*Photograph* R. P. GAIT.

YOUNG TAWNY OWL

CHAPTER XI

BIRDS AND BIRD-TABLES

If bird-fanciers would take the trouble to attract birds to their own gardens and watch them in their natural surroundings, they would find that there is infinitely more pleasure and profit to be obtained from watching a wild bird than one in a cage. How birds can be attracted is well explained in Mr. Massingham's *Sanctuaries for Birds and How to Make Them;* one of the easiest ways is to keep a bird-table, on which may be placed crumbs and other unconsumed viands which would otherwise find their way to the dust-bin. A suspended coco-nut is a never-failing lure for the tits.

There is a marked individuality among birds, and their presence at a table at once forces this upon one's notice. This is a subject which has not yet received from ornithologists the attention which it deserves; observation of individuals is difficult: their plumage is often very similar, but occasionally there are distinctive marks.

One of my bird-tables was once frequented by a blue-tit, who had lost an eye, and wore particularly dingy feathers. He held the table against all comers; if an impertinent sparrow appeared, he lowered his head, spread his tail and wings, and hissed, but did not budge. He was also tamer than the others, and would fly to the table, which was just outside the

window, while I was standing at it. Similar pugnacity was shown by a cock chaffinch who constantly visited a table one spring and summer; he spent a considerable portion of the day in the steady consumption of all kinds of food, so we named him 'Gulo.' However prodigal was our food supply, he would allow no other bird on the board; there was often food for a dozen birds, far more than he could possibly consume in a week, yet none must touch it except him. He was always recognizable, apart from his habits, by a particularly broad white wing-bar. Another cock chaffinch we always knew from his habit of crouching low down on the table, so that, as he fed, his large paunch found support from its boards; we called him *ventre à terre*; he would literally grovel on the table for minutes together, placidly feeding, and looking up at us in complete security, engrossed in the absorption of food. Great-tits, too, differ in the degree of their pugnacity; one always drove off the sparrows and blue-tits; another tolerated them so long as they kept a respectful distance. Some robins are very highly strung, and retire at the advent even of smaller birds, while others attack and drive off tits, or other birds of their own species.

Wounded birds are frequently seen at bird-tables, and so are, of course, easy to identify. I have twice seen great-tits, with only one claw, hanging to our suspended coco-nuts, and feeding thereon without

any apparent inconvenience. Another of this species was tailless when he first began to visit us. It was interesting and surprising to see how soon the new tail grew; in five days the stumps of fresh feathers, covered with transparent sheaths, were visible; by instinct he tried to use this quite inadequate tail as a prop to support himself, when standing on the edge of the table, and hammering the core from nut or hemp seed; it was ludicrous to see him trying to flick it up and down, as though he had a proper one. In three weeks the new tail was half-grown, and in a month it was two-thirds of its normal length. This tit was of an unusually phlegmatic temperament; most birds are, of course, less alarmed by noise than by sudden movement, but he took no notice of a violin played just inside the window, and would feed unconcernedly on the table, with me looking at him from inside the room only a foot or two away.

Another charming trait in birds whose confidence you have won is their return with their young to the bird-table. One spring a hen pied-wagtail systematically fed her young from our board: she would come back at intervals of a few minutes, and fly off with a beakfull of crumbs, always in the same direction; once she came with a mouthful of flies, and departed after adding crumbs to them. (A blue-tit, who fed her young in a nesting box only a few yards from our bird-table, once rolled a bunch of caterpillars in

bread crumbs before taking it to her offspring.) The next day this wagtail appeared on the table with two fully fledged young, and fed them there. About the same time a mistle-thrush also made the discovery that our table was a place in which food could be supplied to her two large fledglings with the minimum of trouble. The youngsters sat gorming on its edge, while she stuffed gobbets of bread and potato into their insatiable maws.

Blue-tits and chaffinches are usually one's commonest visitors. I have already alluded to the pugnacity of one of the first-named species: they will also drive off chaffinches, though sometimes the tables are turned on them: Gulo, for instance, 'went for' any intruding blue-tit at once, and routed him. Among themselves, blue-tits quarrel incessantly; sometimes as many as eight or nine will arrive at once, and the result is a game of leapfrog-cum-general-post. Coco-nuts and suet fat are their favourite dietary, but they have a sweet tooth, and love gingerbread biscuits; they do not take rice, though great-tits eagerly devour it. I believe that if one feeds the blue-tits regularly, the chance of them attacking one's gooseberry buds is greatly lessened; at any rate, they have not as yet attacked mine. Great-tits are fairly common visitors, and, on the whole, tame; coal and marsh-tits come less frequently, and I have never seen the little known willow-tit, nor the long-tailed tit on a bird-table. Two robins, coincid-

ing on a bird-table, of course fight with each other, unless they are mating: one bird last year brought his mate to our bird-table, and fed her there.

Pied wagtails are regular visitors: beside crumbs, they love butter; one quite recently attacked with epicurean relish a fragment of chocolate pudding: he must have thought he had lit upon the Lucullus restaurant. They are inclined to be aggressive, and resent with a hiss the presence of chaffinches. A wren I have only once had on my table; dunnocks are by nature principally ground feeders, and slow at discovering the uses of a bird-table, but once attracted become habitués. Greenfinches feed steadily and phlegmatically, taking no notice of the other guests. A cock blackbird sometimes completely monopolized a small feeding board which once was attached to a window-sill: he waged a furious war against hordes of importunate sparrows, whom he drove off with bayonet-like thrusts of his bill. He had an especial penchant for potato. Sparrows, of course, at any rate near a town or village, are entirely a nuisance; the difficulty is to prevent them gobbling up all the food prepared for less pushful and more interesting species. Nothing will keep them off for long. Black cotton arouses their suspicion of traps, and restrains their trespassing for a season, but familiarity breeds contempt, and they soon become accustomed to it. You may substitute red wool for black cotton; all will be well

for a few days, and then they are back again with seven other devils worse than the first.

A very curious incident was related to me by friends of mine. A great spotted woodpecker visits a bird-table in the verandah of their house. The bird often takes food from the table, places it in the cracks of a birch tree hard by, and consumes it there. One day my friends missed the small knob, shaped like an acorn, from the end of a broken sun-blind cord on the verandah. Subsequently they discovered it wedged into a crack in the birch tree. Inquiries proved that no member of the household had placed it there. Though they did not see the woodpecker take the 'acorn,' there can be little doubt that it was he who placed it in that position. Captain Knight, in his *Bird Life Among the Tree Tops*, describes how he watched a great spotted woodpecker wedging hazel nuts into a sallow, and pecking them open. He adds that they deal with oak galls in the same way.

Birds soon learn that a garden is preserved as a sanctuary. Robins, of course, are proverbially tame, and one with whom I made friends one year grew to be delightfully familiar with us. I first became aware of his presence when, while picking peas, I discovered him seated on the basket at my feet; he constantly made little dives and scurries into the foliage after caterpillars and grubs, and it became difficult to avoid treading on him. He was, at that time, a small, self-contained person clothed in the

brown speckled plumage affected by newly-fledged robins. Soon he learned to take worms from my fingers, and was not long in discovering the bird-table just outside our dining-room window. His taste in food was catholic, extending from crumbs to earwigs, but he had a *grande passion* for sultanas. The remnants of a sultana scone were crumbled on the table, and his avidity was striking. I hit upon the idea of carrying a supply of these nourishing and succulent dainties about with me in an empty match-box, and he rarely failed to respond to the temptation. When I shook the box and whistled, he would fly towards me, sometimes from a hundred yards' distance, and perch expectantly, eyeing the proffered *bonne bouche* in my hand: then, after a slightly suspicious glance at me with a black eye cocked knowingly, he would come with a flutter of wings and take it, sometimes even perching lightly on my fingers to do so. Occasionally he would take two, or three on end.

As he evidently intended to become one of the family, we decided he must have a name, so, after consideration, but for no particular reason, we called him 'James.' He now began to come into the house; half-awake one morning, I was aware of a flickering of wings in my bedroom, and through scarce-opened eyelids dimly discerned James perched upon the bed-rail. A few days before he had dropped into lunch; a day or two later he appeared at breakfast,

finding the top of a high-backed chair a very suitable perch from which to survey the world, edible and inedible; it was decidedly more comfortable than the top of the piano, or of the bureau, on which he slid about in most ungainly fashion. The kitchen, too, apparently met with his approval, but his presence there was not unconnected with certain sultanas strewn alluringly on the window-sill. In these invasions upon our domesticity he showed considerably greater intelligence than the chaffinches. They, if they flew into our rooms, immediately lost their heads, and beat themselves fruitlessly against panes of glass in their endeavours to escape. James was never flurried: after a thorough but critical examination of the premises, he hopped quietly to an open window, and, 'Came out by the same Door as in he went.'

He had not the undisputed patronage of our bird-table; it was also used as a quick-lunch bar by another robin, who knew not James, and objected strongly to his presence. As the strange robin frequently fought with him at the nebulous boundary of their respective territories, I fear that he may have been his unnatural parent. It is well known, of course, that the old robins drive off the young when able to shift for themselves. At first it was easy to recognize James by his juvenile plumage, but by the middle of September, he had acquired the normal expanse of red waistcoat, so that after this to identify

him, except for his tameness and susceptibility to sultanas, was difficult.

Even in his youth he knew the virtue of cleanliness; he affected a bath before retiring to rest. This admirable habit we observed without surprise during the mellow dusk of August and September evenings. It was, however, surprising to find these vespertinal ablutions continued through the clammy rains and sharp frosts of November. To retire to roost in a draughty holly bush, or brushwood pile, with one's body feathers all wet and dripping, struck us as a very chilly proceeding. Apparently robins are made of sterner stuff than we are, for he appeared to thrive on the treatment, and this though his bed-time bath was a very complete affair; for he saw to it that he got the water not only on his breast, but over his back and shoulders also. There was no shivering on the brink or shirking.

As the winter wore on, we noticed his occasional absences, and a certain aloofness in his manner when he returned; but he did not forsake us, and the lure of the sultana was still potent. We hoped that he might find a mate and introduce her to us. However, about the middle of February he disappeared and has never returned. There are other robins in the garden, but none have his engaging sociability.

CHAPTER XII

THE RING AND THE BIRD

THE schemes for the ringing of British Birds in order to discover their movements, migratory or otherwise, owe their origin to the energy and enthusiasm of Mr. H. F. Witherby, and the University of Aberdeen under the direction of Dr. A. Landsborough Thomson. The results of these investigations have been published by the authors, and form an immense and valuable addition to our knowledge of a very intricate and thorny subject. It is not my intention in this chapter to refer to these results, as they are already available, but simply to record some of my own experiences when ringing birds under Mr. Witherby's scheme.

I will first introduce my readers to the gentle art of puffin-digging. Let me say at once that there is no shedding of blood, for you do not slay and eat your puffin. It is said that the Bristol Channel pilots sometimes dine on them, but the carcasses need soaking in water for some days before they are palatable even to those hardy salts, so that puffin *ragoût* is likely to remain caviare to the general. The object of digging for puffins is to mark them, to clip an aluminium ring with a number and address stamped on it round one leg, so that we may (with luck) ascertain whither these strange parrot-like birds migrate when they leave our shores after the

nesting-season; so I obtained permission to visit one of their breeding-haunts and try my hand at them.

The puffin breeds in a rabbit burrow, and the implements necessary for the proper enjoyment of our pastime are a spade, and either a glove or a thick handkerchief which one can wrap round one's fingers. There were a few birds on the side of the island where we landed, but I was told I should find countless numbers farther along the cliffs. However, I began operations at once, and grovelling on the ground beside a likely looking hole, thrust my arm in up to my shoulder; at the extreme end of the cavity I touched something soft and warm that wriggled away from me and then pecked. I drew back my hand involuntarily; then, removing a piece of turf, I thrust it in again, and this time my fingers and thumb got a grip of something fluffy, which the light of day eventually showed to be a young puffin. He was a queer little beast to look at, a plump ball of dusty-black down, with a round, squat head at one end and a pair of short, black legs at the other – in fact, rather like a woolly bird from a toy-shop. At this period of his career he presents a marked contrast to his smart black and white parents. His bill, too, is dark and small, for it is not until he grows up that he becomes the proud possessor of the large orange and red beak which makes the adult puffin so curiously like a parrot. The ring slipped round

the leg quite easily, and when released he scuttled back to his dark nursery without wasting any time about it.

I proceeded leisurely along the cliff, exploring likely burrows as I went, and added two more youngsters to the list. One of them had the wing quills fairly well developed, but he would not be able to fly for a week or two. The warren where the puffins were most populous was a strange and interesting sight. Along the edge of the cliff for several hundreds of yards they stood in rows five or six deep, and behind them, above the nesting-holes, others, with their beaks full of small fish, watched our approach with silent, owlish anxiety. From time to time small companies would desert the cliff and fly headlong down to the sea to join the diving shoals of puffins, guillemots and razorbills beneath.

The next burrow I explored evidently had more than one occupant, and a sharp peck at my fingers showed me that the mother was at home and very angry. Judging discretion to be the better part of valour, I twisted a thick handkerchief round my fingers before I made another call. The lady attacked me with asperity, but a little manœuvring enabled me to insert my fingers round and under her neck, and thus her removal to the upper regions was accomplished. I regret to record that her manners proved to be most unladylike – and her language even more so; in fact, I can only describe it, in the

words of Mr. Kipling, as 'a sort of coughing grunt,' often repeated, and full of disgust and anger. However, the ring was soon clipped on her orange-red shank, and I freed her. She described a sort of waltz movement over and round the neighbouring humps of turf and then flopped and tumbled and fluttered to the cliff-edge, where she took wing to the waves below. Having disposed of the mother, I returned to search for the baby; to my surprise, I found the father at home instead, and in fine fighting trim, for his manners were no better than those of his engaging partner, and his beak was quite as sharp as hers. It was not until the third attempt that I secured the offspring of this interesting pair and thus was able to add to the score 'Monsieur, Madame et Bébé.'

It was hot and tiring work, and when I had ringed seven or eight, lunch came as a welcome interlude. I continued operations in the afternoon, and, with the help of a spade, raised the score to sixteen by tea-time. Some burrows were quite near the surface, but it needed ten minutes' digging to get at the inmates of others; and, of course, many were drawn blank, for their subterranean ramifications are numerous; and the puffin does not always wait for your hand. Other holes led to rocks where they could not be followed farther. I found it convenient to employ two handkerchiefs, one to protect the fingers, and the other to cover the bird when exhumed.

True, if he was an old one, he usually bit through the stuff in about ten seconds, but by that time the ring was safely on his leg. After ringing old ones, it is best to throw them in the air, so that they can fly out to sea at once, and thus save them the rough and tumble of a journey over uneven ground to the cliff-edge; for a puffin is a heavy, short-winged bird, and finds it difficult to get up the impetus necessary for flight when starting from the ground.

By the end of the day I had ringed twenty-three of these fowl, seven old birds and sixteen youngsters, and had got myself into an indescribably dirty condition. The puffin's ideas of sanitation are mediæval. There clung to my clothes 'a most ancient and fish-like smell, a smell of poor John'; I could almost imagine I had been reincarnated as a sardine. Besides my puffins, I had bagged thirteen herring-gulls, half-fledged young ones that were scattered all over the island, and well able, most of them, to fly. I made a tentative excursion on the cliff-face in search of young guillemots and razorbills, but the former, though I could see them from above, were inaccessible except with ropes, and the latter were safely ensconced in rocky crannies. In addition the stench was intolerable, so I left them for another day.

I do not imagine that the pastime I have described will ever be popular. In the first place, puffin-breeding haunts are fortunately well protected, and then, as I have hinted, puffin-digging is a dirty job.

My clothes, even when cleansed with carbolic soap, were still unwearable. It needed the efforts of professional dyers and cleaners to make them supportable in decent company, and then only after a long period of hibernation in a drawer bestrewn plentifully with sprigs of lavender.

I regret to say that, though this unjustifiable intrusion into the puffins' privacy took place some years ago, I have never had any tidings of the birds which I marked. In fact, so far as I can discover, only one ringed puffin has ever been heard of again, and this individual turned up where he received his identity disc a year later.

Another pleasant, though less exciting, episode is concerned with the ringing of common terns, or sea-swallows, on an island off a wild and lonely coast. To reach the spot meant a sail of some two or three miles from our head-quarters. It was an exhilarating morning, with a sparkle of sun, and a spice of freshness in the salt breeze. Across the sweep of blue, foam-dashed sea, mountains loomed mysterious and unattainable in the dim distance. Our skipper was a fine old seaman, whose family had fished these waters for generations. His eyes were the colour of the blue sea he loves, and its salt had burned his cheeks to a mellow, tawny brown, and seamed his face with cracks and wrinkles like an old picture.

As we neared the island, a few terns came winging out to meet us, screaming angrily. The 'sea-swallow'

is, to my mind, the most beautiful of our common sea-birds; its pure grey and white plumage, contrasted with its flame-coloured legs and bill, and black cap, and the gracious curves and dips of its tenuous pinions, combine to make it a vision of loveliness.

'Oh, never from dusty earth you came,
Who sail on the storm's commotion,
With breast of silver and beak of flame,
Fleet winged as the wind's emotion.
When dawn glowered red in a baleful sky,
And the winnowed foam flew scudding by,
With a rapture of beating wings and a cry
You were born of wind and ocean.'

Really, its resemblance to a swallow is only superficial. Its larger size forbids the same aerial agility, and the sharp wing angles mark it at once as nearer akin to the gulls than to the swallow tribe.

At our landing, the birds rose in a snowy cloud about the rugged buttress of weathered rock which forms the island. Screaming hoarsely, they wheeled and hovered and curvetted above us. From the boat, we saw a young oyster-catcher scuttling away over the rocks just above high-water mark, and after a short chase he was captured. Though at first a little frightened at the feel of human hands, he soon seemed to lose his alarm, and nestled quietly on my knee after I had ringed him. We admired his limpid

brown eye, circled faintly with yellow, his speckled plumage of dusky down, changing to black and white feathers, his strong broad feet, and then released him with a light aluminium anklet on his right leg.

Climbing to the top of the crag, we came to the real site of the colony. The rock was strewn with nests, eggs, and young birds, and in some places so thickly that we had to be careful where we stepped to avoid treading upon them. One youngster was in the very act of hatching; the tightly packed sphere of flesh and down gradually unloosened and unrolled inside the cracked egg-shell; first, a head was extruded, then a shoulder and wing appeared, until at last a bedraggled body squirmed and crawled from the broken egg and lay helpless and sprawling upon the sun-warmed stone. It was hardly believable that so large a bulk was but a few moments ago imprisoned in that narrow casket.

The eggs varied in colour considerably, even in the same nest, some pale green, some bright and others dark brown, and all blurred and splotched and lined with black or sepia spots and markings. Some rested upon the bare rock, others upon little pads of herbage filling slight depressions, while others were cradled in roughly shaped hollows in scanty patches of coarse grass. A few we found with holes in them apparently pecked by some feathered marauder. I suspect strongly certain disreputable carrion crows that I noticed skulking about the shore on our out-

ward journey, but I admit that I have no direct evidence against them.

The young birds were of all sizes, some only a few hours hatched, others in mottled down, and perhaps a dozen able to run pretty fast and even flutter with the aid of their half-grown wing feathers. About thirty were old enough to be ringed, but they were not as docile under the operation as my young friend the oyster-catcher. They struggled violently, and the largest ones bit viciously at my fingers with their pretty orange beaks, and even nipped their own little pink webbed feet in their anger at such outrageous treatment. As I ringed them, I wondered whether I should ever hear of them again. By the winter these tiny balls of fluff might have travelled to tropic seas; a naked savage might find my bird dead and draggled on the beach after a hurricane, and carry its bracelet slung round his dusky neck as an amulet. Ringing a bird is like calling into a telephone which connects only with the 'vasty deep.' Somewhere at the other end is that mysterious and wonderful force which controls bird migration. Too often our call meets with no response; even when an answer comes it often tantalizes by suggesting for solution other questions yet more baffling. But that is one of the joys of life, to see wider fields of wonder opening out before us for exploration and discovery.

I never got any answer. British-ringed common terns have been found on the western sea-board of

mid-France, and as far south as Spain and Portugal: but of none of mine have I ever received tidings, nor is it likely now that I shall.

Not wishing to keep the old birds off the unhatched young and eggs for longer than necessary, we did not make a long stay at the island. The nests were confined to a few patches on the rocks, and outside those areas we hardly found an egg. Within a few minutes of our departure the anxious parents were back at their duties; we could see them hover for a moment, and then fold their slim, white pinions as they took earth once more.

Returning with the wind behind us, we saw a sheld-duck lead her flotilla of eight ducklings down from the rocks into the sea, and pilot them to a safe distance. Inland, along the coast-line, as we found later, the stockdove lays her two white eggs in a disused rabbit burrow, and pecks smartly at intruding fingers. Along the shore the ringed plovers scurry and pipe querulously. You may find their eggs in a hollow in the sand, above high-water mark. On the higher heathlands the nightjar springs his strange rattle as soon as dusk comes. It blends weirdly with the chatter of the oyster-catcher, the wail of the curlew, and the hoarse bark of the heron. Untroubled by wind and ripple, the bay dreams in the hushed twilight. But the birds are never silent. All night they are crooning and wailing restlessly.

Another ringing expedition, which lasted several

days, had for its scene a belt of sand-hills fringing a northern coast-line. This time I was too early for the young terns, but redshanks had young, and to track them required considerable patience and ingenuity. One pair, feverishly anxious over tender progeny, I watched for two hours, but they beat me. The next day I was more successful with another pair, and bagged a brace of buff and tortoiseshell downed youngsters. Wishing to see whether they could swim, I put them in a small pool of shallow water, warmed by the midday sun, and found that they floated and swam without difficulty. As soon as I left, one of the parents returned, called them out of the water and brooded them. Another couple of young I also captured without incident later in the day.

Portions of these sand-hills were clothed with a species of dwarf willow, and among this cover it was almost impossible to spot my quarry – a fact which resulted in one blank morning. My next day's bag was five, and provided good sport. After I had ringed the first two, I put them together in a scoop in the sand, and retired to hiding. Soon one of the parents, probably the hen, returned to them and tried to lead them up to the top of a steep, sandy bluff; she went first herself, and every now and then turned round and called to them; one got about half-way up, but tired with his exertions, so his mother thoughtfully returned and brooded him. Then I saw

the cock bird go down to two more of his offspring which had been hiding in the marram grass. These I ringed, and collecting three of the brood – all I could find – carried them to the brooding-place halfway up the bluff, and again concealed myself. The young soon began trying to make the steep ascent to the top of the sand-hill; their mother came down to meet them; two reached her safely in spite of continual trippings up and stumblings; the third was less lucky; he had nearly reached the summit when he took a toss, and tumbled, literally head over heels, some thirty feet from the top of the bluff to the bottom. For a moment or two he seemed dazed, but soon plucked up his courage, and this time made a successful ascent. Rain came on, and the hen brooded three of her callow nestlings, while her mate retrieved another.

On the following day I ringed two more young. I recall the marking of the first of them with some satisfaction, because he was reported some four and a half years later in the same place, but whether dead or alive I did not discover. Other ringers have met with better luck; their protégés have travelled from Scotland to Ireland, from Warwickshire to Cornwall and from Lancashire to South Devon.

A brood of young common sandpipers, found on the banks of a moorland stream in the Pennines, provided a pleasant diversion. One, when I chased it, took to the water, and swam and dived, using both

feet and wings, to elude capture. I noticed that, while submerged, small air bubbles adhered to its feathers. Two others of the same family I ran to earth, one in the middle of a remarkably prickly gorse bush, and the other in a hole beneath a stone wall from which I extracted it by means of its embryonic tail feathers. These two, when ringed, I put in the stream, and they swam quite strongly, but did not dive. Of the subsequent whereabouts of these I have received no intelligence.

Of late years I have rarely ringed birds, because I found that this occupation absorbed more time than I could afford to give. There is also another reason: the bird-watcher, though nothing is too small or insignificant for his notice, naturally prefers to observe species which are either rarely recorded in the British Islands or are uncommon in the particular district where he works. Reports of recoveries of birds ringed in these circumstances may give away information to undesirable persons.

CHAPTER XIII

BIRDS AND POETS

'In a bird-poem I want the real bird as a basis – not merely a description of it, but its true place in the season and in the landscape, and no liberties taken with the facts of its life history. I must see or hear or feel the live bird in the verses. . . . Give me the real bird first, and then all the poetry that can be evoked from it.' Thus wrote John Burroughs, the American naturalist, in the introduction to his anthology *Songs of Nature*. A man who can write a good poem must have something both of the poet and of the naturalist in him. No mere egg-snatcher has ever written poetry, nor is he ever likely to do so.

It would be difficult to define a bird-poem. The best of them recall the bird to memory; by some subtle artistry they make us see and hear it; cunning rhythm and cadence conjure up its very song, or give us some delightful poise or wing-beat which we have noticed and loved. At the same time they make articulate for us the emotions which were aroused when we saw or heard it; we feel these emotions dumbly: only poets can put them into words. Many poems succeed in producing one or the other of these effects, but very few satisfy both requirements.

Burroughs, later on in the passage quoted above, says there is 'another class of bird-poem, or poems

inspired by birds, such as Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*, in which there is little or no natural history, not even of the sublimated kind,' and adds that they 'take high rank as poems.' Truly they do, but not, I submit, as bird-poems. Burroughs includes this Ode in his nature anthology apparently on the ground that 'when the poet can give us himself, we can well afford to miss the bird.' To my mind it is one of the most, perhaps *the* most lovely lyric in the English language, but though it is, as Burroughs says, inspired by a bird, it is not quite a perfect bird-poem. All the atmosphere, sensuous and spiritual, of the nightingale's song is there, but the poem might have been written by a man who had never seen a nightingale, and would not know one if he saw it. In fact, most poems about birds, perhaps because poetry and ornithological knowledge are not often combined in one character, are bird-inspired rather than bird-poems.

It is impossible to deal exhaustively with the subject in a single chapter; a moderately sized book would hardly suffice. One can only select what especially appeals to one's own taste, and this must be my excuse for any omissions. After all, if a poem, or a line or stanza from it, comes back again and again to memory, and is so recalled with pleasure, it must have some virtue. One poem which seems to me to fulfil all the requirements of a bird-poem is T. E. Brown's *Vespers*:

'O blackbird, what a boy you are!
How you do go it!
Blowing your bugle to that one sweet star –
How you do blow it!
And does she hear you, blackbird boy, so far?
Or is it wasted breath?
"Good Lord, she is so bright
To-night!"
The blackbird saith.'

I know no poem which gives so satisfying an interpretation of the blackbird's song. The last three lines, besides being pure poetry, render the inconsequent cadence of his naïve folk-song to perfection. (Two lines from Horne's poem, *The Plough*, express in the same way the song's artless quality:

'With his own lonely moods
The blackbird holds a colloquy.'

As the desultory phrases fall from his golden bill, he seems to be thinking aloud in music. The thrush is a conscious artist. Your blackbird, as Bottom would say, is 'more condoling.')

Mr. Martin Armstrong's poem, *The Buzzards*, from which I have quoted in a previous chapter, I would place equally high. The description of this bird's soaring evening flight could hardly be bettered, and the lines express wonderfully the sense of free-

dom and inspiration which the spectacle transmits to the onlooker.

Another bird-poem of the highest rank is Mr. J. C. Squire's *The Birds*. I know none which describes so understandingly the miracle of birds' nests, and that wonderful instinct which teaches each one to construct correctly at the first attempt the cradle which his kind has built after the same pattern from generation to generation throughout the ages. In this poem truth and imagination are blended, nor can I discover any ornithological error. Quotation is inadequate; but this extract will, I hope, make anyone who does not know the poem read it at once.

'O delicate chain over all the ages stretched,
O dumb tradition from what far darkness fetched:
Each little architect with its one design
Perpetual, fixed and right in stuff and line,
Each little ministrant who knows one thing,
One learnèd rite to celebrate the Spring.'

In the same class is Walt Whitman's *Out of the Cradle endlessly Rocking*. Though he gives us little or no description of the birds themselves, it is obvious from the context that this is not because he could not have done so, but because it was not necessary. For the tragedy of the bird's anguish at the death of his mate is the theme on which the poet builds a threnody which transcends the pain and despair of

the individual, and voices for all time the agony of human heartache at the loss of loved ones.

'But my love no more, no more with me!
We two together no more.'

Many poems which are not 'bird'-poems contain passages which distil the essence of a mood of nature into one or two exquisite lines of bird-poetry. For instance:

'The redbreast whistles from a garden croft,
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.'

Could any language suggest more perfectly and tersely a picture of an English autumn? And does not

'While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England – now'

set one's pulses tingling with the glow of a crisp spring morning?

Mr. Masefield's poem *The Wild Duck* with equal power etches the eeriness of an autumn sunset and moonrise, when the duck

'Wings linked. Necks a-strain,
A rush and a wild crying',

come flying to a lonely, wooded pool.

And there are other poems which, in spite of their not being bird-poems, contain a line or two which sets the very bird before our eyes more vividly than a page of scientific description; others show flashes

of insight which come only to poets. There is Mr. Yeats's

'And evening full of the linnet's wings.'

How wonderfully these few words suggest the whisper of wings fluttered softly and then folded in sleep. Or again, take Davenant's

'The lark now leaves his wat'ry nest
And climbing shakes his dewy wings.'

Possibly the well-known and very beautiful setting of these verses to music unconsciously heightens the delight which they give, but I know none which so truly wake in one the joy of a dewy May morning. And then there is Wordsworth's

'O Nightingale! thou surely art
A creature of a fiery heart.'

Here is all the intense passion of its song captured in a couplet.

But the poet who excels all others within my knowledge, both in intimate understanding of the moods of nature and in an almost uncanny faculty for expressing them, is Edward Thomas. Quite half of his poems contain some mention of birds, and there is hardly one of these that has not some jewel of observation set in a clean-cut phrase or simile which none but a poet could shape.

To appreciate Thomas you have to learn his dialect. For in his individuality of expression (and,

to be quite frank, in his occasional obscurity) he resembles George Meredith. But once learn his idiom, and you will enjoy. Nearly all his poems are pitched in a low key, and he loves to play with muted strings. His restrained music is like the almost inaudible prelude to the blackcap's song, or the notes of his *Unknown Bird*, 'too soft to be heard if others sang.' It is an Æolian harp inspired by the winds of his wayward moods. And yet, again and again, in the midst of his quiet harmonies, suddenly there flashes a phrase whose brilliance startles and delights; often it etches some charming and well-known idiosyncrasy in a bird – 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd.'

Few of his poems can strictly be called 'bird-poems': they are too elusive. *Two Pewits* has rare beauty:

> 'Under the after-sunset sky
> Two pewits sport and cry,
> . . . . . .
> And merrily they cry
> To the mischievous spring sky,
> Plunging earthward, tossing high,
> Over the ghost who wonders why
> So merrily they cry and fly,
> Nor choose 'twixt earth and sky,
> While the moon's quarter silently
> Rides, and earth rests as silently.'

But quotation does not do justice. You can only catch Thomas's peculiarly subtle charm by assimilating a whole poem, with its swift changes of mood, as shy and shadowy as his 'fallow fawns' which 'invisible go.' In *The Unknown Bird*, though you are told little about the 'three lovely notes he whistled,' you feel, after you have let the poem sink into your mind, that you yourself have heard them, even if he says 'I alone could hear him.' The lovely, mysterious notes seem to play hide-and-seek in and about the great beechwood. Yet, like the poet, you are certain that you 'had them clear by heart, and have them still.'

The Hollow Wood, too, shows the same intuitive intimacy:

> 'Out in the sun the goldfinch flits
> Along the thistle-tops, flits and twits
> Above the hollow wood
> Where birds swim like fish.'

It has but some dozen lines, and yet you know all the secrets of the wood with its trees, 'half-flayed and dying,' and of the birds that fly to and fro among their branches.

It is more easy to illustrate by quotation some of his more vivid intuitions – 'bird-epigrams' one might call them:

'While over them shrill shrieked in his fierce glee
The swift with wings and tail as sharp and narrow
As if the bow had flown off with the arrow.'

There could not be a more sharp and clean silhouette of the eager flight of the 'devil-bird,' to use its Cheshire name.

'And when in June
Once more the cuckoo spoils his tune.'

How much more expressive is 'spoils' than 'changes' in the well-known rhyme.

Here are three thrush themes, quaint and whimsical, yet all true to life:

'When the thrush cock sings
Bright irrelevant things.'

And

'. . . where the thrush sings well
His proverbs untranslatable.'

Or

'All day long a thrush twiddles his song.'

And again:

'Or must I be content with discontent,
As larks and swallows are perhaps with wings?'

How original and quaint is this suggestion of doubt in the minds of two birds who seem to glory in their perfect mastery over air.

Here is a perfect thumb-nail sketch of a magpie on 'a beech-tree's tip':

. . . 'A magpie veering about,
A magpie like a weathercock in doubt.'

Enjoy also this accurate and beautiful wagtail picture:

'running up and down
The warm tiles of the roof slope, twittering
Happily and sweetly as if the sun itself
Extracted the song.'

One could, if space permitted, go on quoting things as good as these almost endlessly. But I must mark down another typical trait in Thomas – his attitude of detachment towards birds, and indeed towards nature. This from *The Gallows*, i.e. the keeper's:

'There was a magpie, too,
Had a long tongue and a long tail;
He could both talk and do –
But what did that avail?
He, too, flaps in the wind and rain
Alongside weasel and crow,
Without pleasure, without pain,
On the dead oak tree bough.'

Here are facts, but no comments. This detachment reminds one of Hudson. It is the only sane attitude towards Nature; we must accept her as she is, and not sentimentalize.

George Meredith, though not really a naturalist, had a good working knowledge of birds. His *Lark Ascending* is certainly the best lark poem ever written. The metre itself is, to me, infinitely more expressive of the skylark's song than the somewhat jerky rhythm of Shelley's well-known verses, where the trochee at the end of the first and third lines of each stanza often breaks the rhythm, and pulls one up with a jolt. Meredith's description of the bird's song might well be applied to the impetuous rapture of his own verse:

> 'He drops the silver chain of sound
> Of many links without a break,
> In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake,
> All intervolved and spreading wide,
> Like water-dimples down a tide
> Where ripple ripple overcurls
> And eddy into eddy whirls;
> A press of hurried notes that run
> So fleet they scarce are more than one,
> Yet changeingly the hills repeat
> And linger ringing while they fleet.'

In wealth and profusion of imagery he is certainly not inferior to Shelley, and in interpreting the spirit of the song he touches deeper truths. To Shelley, such artless joy is unattainable by mortals. Meredith knew its secret, and found it in men whose love of 'Earth' was deep.

Mr. Herbert Trench's *Song of the Larks at Dawn*, though not, perhaps, a 'bird'-poem in the stricter sense, points to the same truth with its refrain 'And men, lift up your eyes.' Listening to the song,

'To-day we too are the wingèd sons of the morning
To-day we will arise!'

And in Mr. James Stephens' *The Song*, it is the larks who lead him upwards:

'Reach up my wings!
Now broaden into space and carry me
Beyond where any lark that sings
Can get: . . .
. . . to the void of space,
The emptiness, the giant curve, the great
Wide-stretching arms wherein the gods embrace
And stars are born and suns.'

The same poet, in '*The Fifteen Acres*,' has caught the artless joy of birds as they flit and sing in the fragrant sunlight of a summer morning. Whitethroats always seem to be bubbling over with emotion; they are so restless and vociferous. Mr. Stephens' poem forces us to share this *insouciant* intoxication of happiness, so far as mere man can do so:

'I cling and swing
On a branch, or sing
Through the cool, clear hush of morning, O:

Or fling my wing
In the air, and bring
To sleepier birds a warning, O:
That the night's in flight,
And the sun's in sight,
And the dew is the grass adorning, O.'

Others of Meredith's poems ring with bird music. In *The Young Princess* the opening lines give out the 'nightingale theme':

'When the South sang like a nightingale
Above a bower in May.'

Each succeeding stanza, with subtle changes in stress and cadence, is a variation on the same subject; the whole poem throbs with the melody. Towards the end of the poem the same theme is recapitulated:

'Sang loud, sang low the rapturous bird
Till the yellow hour was nigh,
Behind the folds of a darker cloud:
He chuckled, he sobbed, alow aloud;
The voice between earth and sky.'

As the magic strains float upon the air of a southern summer night, heavy with subtle scents of earth and flower, romance spreads its glamour over moonlit wood and valley.

Another great poem of Meredith's is *The Thrush in February*. True, it is more a splendid pæan of his 'Earth' philosophy than a bird-poem, but it catches the note of exulting promise and hope in the song of

a thrush heard on one of those first clear February evenings when Nature is waking from her winter sleep. The line

'His *island* voice you then shall hear'

is memorable. It embodies the arrogant individuality of a lonely thrush's challenge at sunset; a quality so arresting as to give the impression that everything, animate and inanimate, is listening to the music.

Then there is his '*Melampus*,' who

'With love exceeding a simple love of the things
That glide in grasses and rubble of woody wreck;
Or change their perch on a beat of quivering wings
From branch to branch, only restful to pipe and peck,'

learns, like Siegfried, wisdom of Earth from the song of a bird:

'I pipe him much for his good could he understand.'

There are bird pictures, too, in *Love in a Valley* which imprint themselves on our memory with the clearness of a well-cut cameo:

'Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweeping
Wavy on the dusk lit by one large star.
Lone on the fir branch his rattle note unvaried
Brooding o'er the gloom, spins the brown eve-jar.'

Nor can I omit mention of the exquisite 'sonnet' in *Modern Love* beginning:

'We saw the swallows gathering in the sky
And in the osier-isle we heard them noise,'

in which the poet so poignantly mirrors the tragedy of the lovers – 'rapid falcons in a snare' – in the melancholy calm of an autumn sunset.

It is the fashion in these days to decry Tennyson. But many will always remember and love *The Throstle* if only for the sake of

' "New, new, new, new!" is it then so new
That you should carol so madly?'

Browning's poem *Thus the Mayne Glideth* (from *Paracelsus*) has also a vivid *vignette* of sandpipers:

'Where the quick sandpipers flit
In and out the marl and grit
Which seem to breed them, brown as they.'

The lines flash the bird, and its elusiveness, due to its wonderful protective colouration, before one's eyes. Wordsworth calls it 'the glancing sandpiper,' remembering, no doubt, its flickering flight.

Browning's *The Lady and the Painter* is one of the many poems which hold up to scorn the stupid vandalism which destroys useful and beautiful birds for personal adornment, or food:

'You – clothed in murder of his best
Of harmless beings.'

And yet they still wear osprey plumes!

Mr. Ralph Hodgson's *Hymn to Moloch* is even more bitterly ironical. The imaginary dealer in plumage is roused to scurrilous indignation at 'a white-livered Scum' who

> 'say there's a time
> In the future not far
> When birds worth good money'll
> Waste by the ton
> And the Trade can look perishin
> Pleased to look on':

while all the time there are

> 'ospreys and ummins
> An other choice goods
> Wastefully oppin
> About in the woods.'

The Plumage Act has in part fulfilled these gloomy forebodings, but the evil is very far from being scotched.

The same author's *Stupidity Street* has an irony more delicate but not less pointed:

> 'I saw with open eyes
> Singing birds sweet
> Sold in the shops
> For the people to eat,
> Sold in the shops of
> Stupidity Street.'

It is incomprehensible to me how any man or woman who has heard a lark sing can want to eat it.

Mr. F. B. Young's poem, *The Quails*, must bring home to the most callous the hideous cruelty of the blinded decoy quail, 'crying for light as the quails cry for love.' These birds are by this means netted in thousands in the spring in some parts of Italy.

> 'I, in the darkness,
> Heard, and my heart grew sick.'

Shakespeare's *Hark, hark the Lark* is a lyric which one loves, though it suffers from the subjective obsession which, to modern ears, disfigures most Elizabethan nature lyrics. His *Under the Greenwood Tree* is always welcome for the echo of the thrush's refrain, 'Come hither, come hither, come hither.' Here, indeed, we have

> 'Sweetest Shakespeare, fancy's child,
> Warbling his native wood-notes wild.'

The well-known sketch of the dabchick in *Venus and Adonis* always seems to me a particularly vivid description of that shy, secretive bird:

> 'Like a dive-dapper peering thro' a wave,
> Who being looked at ducks as quickly in.'

'*Summer is icumen in*' would find a place in my private anthology of bird poems. It has a stark,

pagan simplicity which is especially pleasing amid the sophistries of some modern verse; 'cu-cu' is its keynote; in fact, in a well-known musical setting of the lines, it forms a kind of ground-bass. Another charming cuckoo song forms one of the stanzas of an old French folk-song called *Et moi de m'en courir*:

'En passant dans un p'tit bois
Où le cou-cou chantait,
Où le cou-cou chantait;
Dans son joli chant il disait,
Cou-cou, cou-cou, cou-cou, cou-cou;
Et moi qui croyais qu'il disait
'Cass' lui le cou, cass' lui le cou!'
Et moi de m'en cour', cour', cour',
Et moi de m'en courir!'

It perhaps can hardly be called a 'bird-poem': it is too frankly subjective. But it has a roguish humour of its own, and also a smack of the soil.

Another poem of quaint humour is the late Sir F. Carruthers Gould's *The Blue-Tit*:

'The Blue-tit stands upon his head,
And does the green-flies brown,
For when they think they're climbing up,
They're really going down.'

Its fidelity to life makes it a good bird-poem too.

Wordsworth was not a good field-naturalist: there were not many in his day. But I love his

'Up with thee, up with thee into the clouds,'

because of the lilt and uplift of the opening lines. Its beginning is much happier than that of another 'skylark' poem of his. To address this light-hearted little bird as

'Ethereal minstrel, pilgrim of the sky,'

seems a trifle ludicrous.

From the frequent allusions to the cuckoo in his poems he would seem to have had a great affection for a bird which modern ornithologists hold to be a polyandrous, or even a promiscuous parasite. To him the cuckoo is

'No Bird: but an invisible Thing,
A voice, a mystery.'

He expresses the same fancy in those haunting lines in *The Solitary Reaper*:

'A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring time from the cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.'

(The elfish wizardry of the cuckoo's call is more elaborately treated by Mr. E. B. Sargant in *Cuckoo Wood*.)

Wordsworth's poem *The Reverie of Poor Susan* ('at the corner of Wood Street') has, I think, achieved a popularity which exceeds its worth. The poet expresses well the country girl's joy at hearing, in stuffy London, the thrush's song, which takes her back to her old home: but it does not appear to have occurred to him to consider what the thrush thought about it, imprisoned there for three long years. Mr. Seumas O'Sullivan's *Lark's Song* has deeper insight into the feelings of a lark penned in a cage in sordid 'Mercer Street':

> 'Sudden some old swift memory brings
> The knowledge of forgotten wings,
> He springs elate and panting falls
> At the rude touch of prison walls.'

Webster, the Elizabethan dramatist, wrote

'We think caged birds sing, when indeed they cry.'

But Blake's

> 'A Robin Redbreast in a cage
> Puts all heaven in a rage,'

is the best comment. The time will surely come when those who are really in tune with nature will realize that a bird in the bush is worth two in the hand.

The natural history of Webster's

> 'Call for the robin redbreast and the wren,
> Since o'er shady groves they hover
> And with leaves and flowers do cover
> The friendless bodies of unburied men,'

is fantastic enough; but the lines keep fresh the old legend which must have its foundation in the charming friendliness which these two little birds seem to cherish towards mankind.

In Henley's *Margaritae sorori* ('a late lark twitters from the quiet skies') the skylark's ethereal music is heard throughout the whole poem, to its close:

> 'My wages taken, and in my heart
> Some late lark singing,
> Let me be gathered to the quiet West,
> The sundown splendid and serene,
> Death.'

Every bird-watcher has felt at some time or other, and with varying intensity, the mystery of bird-life. 'The secrets of nature have not more gift in taciturnity.' After all the hours spent so happily in their company, how little we know of what life really means to them. This sense of mystery is subtly suggested in Mr. Monro's *The Bird at Dawn*, which closes thus:

'If no man had invented human word,
And a bird-song had been
The only way to utter what we mean,
What would we men have heard,
What understood, what seen,
Between the thrills and pauses, in between
The singing and the silence of a bird?'

Mr. T. Sturge Moore's poem, *Wings*, voices a thought which is continually borne in upon us as we watch birds in flight, though we may not have the power to express it so happily:

'Feather from under feather springs;
All open like a fan;
Our eyes upon their beauty dwell
And marvel at the plan
By which things made for use so rare
Are powerful and delicate and fair.'

Miss Evelyn Underhill, in *Immanence*, touches the deeper springs:

'I come in the little things,
Saith the Lord:
Yea! on the glancing wings
Of eager birds . . .
. . . In brown bright eyes
That peep from out the brake, I stand confest.
On every nest

Where feathery Patience is content to brood
And leaves her pleasure for the high emprize
Of Motherhood –
There doth My Godhead rest.'

Birds are a revelation of the spirit behind nature, and the essence of that revelation is contained in these inspired lines.

Mr. Prewett's *Snow-buntings* is, so far as I know, the only attempt to celebrate these birds in verse. They are winter migrants to England, and difficult to observe. Amid bleak deserted moors they do indeed

'Come fluttering helpless to the ground
Like wreaths of wind-caught snow,'

and disappear as suddenly

'Adrift between earth desolate, and leaden sky.'

To quote from the many other poems which have charming bird passages is tempting, but this chapter would then become perilously like a catalogue. I will merely mention some of them very briefly, and leave those who are interested to refer to the originals. In Sir H. Newbolt's *The Adventurers*, 'chiff-chaff whetting his airy scythe' is a line that sticks in one's memory. Then there is Mr. de la Mare's *Titmouse*, in which 'Jangle a glass-clear wildering stave' catches the crystalline brilliancy of

its song. Also there is much truth and beauty in Mr. W. H. Davies' *Birds* and *The East in Gold*: he loves birds and has an intimate feeling for their dainty ways. Clare's

> 'Pretty swallow come again,
> Come and pass me in the rain.'

is delightful. Mr. W. W. Gibson in *Wings* catches the wild beauty of

> 'A blue-necked mallard alighting in a pool.'

And Mr. A. Y. Campbell's *A Bird* is a very vivid sketch of an (un-named) wader. The fine spaciousness of Mr. Ralph Hodgson's *The Song of Honour* is inspired in part by bird music, and many of the allusions to birds have insight, such as

> The song of men divinely wise
> Who look and see in starry skies
> Not stars so much as robins' eyes.

But it is a 'harmonious hymn of being' for all creation, and for that reason cannot be called specifically a bird poem.

The errors in ornithology committed by poets are legion; one could easily write a chapter on this subject alone. Of course the allusions to the nightingale's supposed habit of impaling her breast upon a thorn cannot be classed as ornithological lapses; they are merely conventional imagery. No self-

respecting Elizabethan rhymster dare write about Philomela without dragging it in; it simply was not done. Sidney managed it better than any of them:

'O Philomela fair, O take some gladness
That here is juster cause of plaintful sadness:
Thine earth now springs, mine fadeth;
Thy thorn without, my thorn my heart invadeth.'

But there are many other mistakes which are due not to imagination but to pure ignorance. The stock-dove was the 'stock' dove of most of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century poets, and they constantly confuse it with the ring-dove, and even with the turtle-dove. The robin's friendliness has blinded many to other less pleasant traits in his character. The ingenuous Wordsworth calls him

'The pious Bird with the scarlet breast.'

If he had ever seen a young robin fighting his parent for possession of his pitch, he might have changed the adjective. 'Our little English Robin' who comes so confidingly, is, as like as not, a parricide, who, instead of tucking his beak peacefully under his wing, has stuck it into his father's throat!

Tennyson's 'many wintered crow, that leads the clanging rookery home' may be excused as poetic licence. Rooks are gregarious; crows – i.e. carrion crows – are solitary birds and drive off intruders.

They sometimes roost together in small parties in winter – but not in rookeries.

Clare, though in many ways an accurate observer, nodded when he made his 'little trotty wagtail' stoop to get a worm. On referring to a standard ornithological work I find that the food of the pied wagtail consists chiefly of 'diptera, but also coleoptera, as well as their larvæ'; 'Fine confused feeding,' no doubt, but worms are not included in any of these categories. A seventeenth-century poet makes an owl shut his 'round blue eyes.' But the eyes of the various species of owl vary through divers shades of yellow to brown and black. Not the bird's but the poet's eyes were shut.

It is surprising to find Shakespeare, who was country born and bred, apparently falling into a vulgar error, or rather into three, in as many lines. In *The Merchant of Venice* we find Portia saying:

> 'The nightingale, if she should sing by day
> When every goose is cackling, would be thought
> No better a musician than the wren.'

Now Shakespeare, reared

> 'Where nightingales in Arden sit and sing
> Amid the dainty dew-impearlèd flowers,'

must have known that the nightingale does sing by day; and why did he not choose some less exuberant songster than the wren to decry by comparison?

Troglodytes troglodytes troglodytes (who but dusty ornithologists would give such a name to three inches of cheek and feathers?) winds a cheerful strain which makes the woodland ring, in spite of his pygmy dimensions. No, it is Portia, and not Shakespeare, who is speaking; she was a town-bred lady, and a better student of human nature than of birds. But whether Shakespeare knew that only the male nightingale sings, it is permissible to doubt. Many good poets have since fallen into the same error.

In this connection we may touch upon the curious inability of some authors to distinguish the blackbird's and the song-thrush's songs. How can one imagine any bird but the throstle singing

'She is sorry, sorry, sorry,
Let her in! Let her in!'

or

'And what'll *he* do? What'll *he* do?'

Yet both phrases occur in alleged blackbirds' songs.

Birds occur frequently in 'War' poems. Perhaps the most moving instance is Julian Grenfell's *Into Battle*:

'The blackbird sings to him, "Brother, brother,
If this be the last song you shall sing,
Sing well, for you may not sing another.
Brother, sing."'

The nearness of death often carries the mind back to country scenes beloved in childhood. When the dying Falstaff 'babbled o' green fields,' he must have remembered, too, the birds which sang in them.

There is a line in the *Odyssey* which, however often I say it, never fails to fill me with wonder and pleasure. Odysseus, disguised as a beggar in his own house, after Penelope's suitors have all failed to bend the bow which was his, handles and strings it himself at the first attempt. He tries the taut bow-string with his thumb,

ἡ δ' ὑπο καλὸν ἄεισε, χελιδόνι εἰκέλη αὐδήν.

'Sweetly it sang to his touch, like the sibilant lilt of a swallow.' This imperfect attempt at a translation fails to give more than a glimpse of the beautifully smooth flow of the labials, and the cunning checks of the dentals in the original. As an onomatopoeic rendering of the swallow's lovely twitterings the Greek line cannot be bettered; and the thought of old, blind Homer, listening to and loving their contented conversation some summer's evening thousands of years ago, bridges the passage of time; we feel a breath of 'the spirit breathed from dead men to their kind.'

Many of the poets from whose works I have quoted in this chapter are no longer alive; yet we may surely say of them, as did Callimachus of his dead friend Heraclitus,

αἱ δὲ τεαὶ ζώουσιν ἀηδόνες, ἧσιν ὁ πάντων
ἁρπακτὴρ Ἀΐδης οὐκ ἐπὶ χεῖρα βαλεῖ,

or, as W. J. Cory translated,

'Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.'

EPILOGUE

PAN DISPOSSESSED

THERE was a small wild pool, remote amid meadows, reéd-fringed, and shaded by willows and alders. On one side, when the rains had fallen generously, it lipped over, and trickled through rushes down to a stream. Here in spring grew forget-me-nots and yellow kingcups, and tall flags crowned with purple *fleurs de lys* in summer. Clear and brown and still were its waters, for it lay in a little hollow and the trees screened it; the roughest winds only ruffled its calm with little eddies, wayward as thoughts. And by its side a man might find peace for a space.

Birds loved the pool; sedge- and reed-warblers chattered among its reeds and sedges; across its surface moorhens swam, flirting their tails jerkily. Sometimes a kingfisher perched upon a low branch of willow, eyeing the minnows greedily, or darted like a green scarab across its placid face. Water-voles tunnelled along its banks, and chased each other in and out of the alder roots.

And by the pool dwelt Pan. When the wan sickle of a young moon was poised low in the west, and the scent of honeysuckle was wafted over the meadows, he piped wild, sweet melodies on his syrinx, and the willow dryads danced as he played, their lithe, white limbs glancing in the pale moonlight. The water-

voles sat up on their haunches to watch and the moorhens clucked like castanets.

The rustics heard Pan piping; they said it was a nightingale. An ornithologist heard him too; he said it was a sedge-warbler whose song was of extraordinary sweetness. So that he might be quite sure, he shot the sedge-warbler, and wrote a learned monograph to show that it was a new sub-species. For he was an ornithologist and not a bird lover. But still Pan went on piping.

All this happened long ago. When the War was over the pool was sold, and the meadows round it. And the man who bought it had made much money out of the War, and he wanted to build him a house near by the pool.

Now this man had a tidy mind. He brought a builder, a tidy minded man also, and bade him set the wild pool in order, for it was to be within the garden of the house. So the man and his builder hired other men, and hewed down the willows and alders, and grubbed up their roots; and they cleansed the pool and plucked out the flags and forget-me-nots and kingcups. They laid down a rim of smooth, solid concrete all round its banks, and beyond an asphalt walk; and they levelled the meadow, and planted it with fine grass which they kept shaven and tidy. They set up white stones symmetrically round the edge of the pool and along the borders of the asphalt walk; and hard by they planted pampas

grass and built a 'rustic' summerhouse. And in the middle of the pool they set upon a pedestal a marble female figure, chastely draped. So all was tidy.

Pan fled away when the men came. But one night, when the tidiness was complete, he crept stealthily back across the meadows, dewy beneath a silver slip of a moon. He hid himself amid a clump of pampas grass and listened, and looked out over the pool; he whistled softly and waited, but no one answered. For the willow dryads died when the trees were hewn down, and the man had poisoned the water-voles, for he thought they were rats. As for the reed-warblers and the sedge-warblers and the moor-hens, they had long since been scared away.

Pan tiptoed across the shaven grass and called to the marble lady, but she made no sign. So he waded out through the water to her, splashing with his goat hoofs; he climbed upon her pedestal and stroked her marble cheeks and shoulders, but they were cold. And still she made no sign.

Pan came sadly back to the bank. He looked round upon the man's tidy garden. There was not a wild spot left in it. Pan shivered, and shook his shaggy locks, and sighed a deep sigh. Then, for the last time, he put his pipes to his lips and blew, so softly and so sweetly, a low, crooning strain of beauty and sadness, of longing and regret. Far it floated over the dewy, fragrant meadows; the hares heard it

and pricked their long sensitive ears, and forgot to browse upon the honeyed clover.

And then came the little cold wind which ushers in the dawn, and Pan ceased from his piping. Huddled and shivering, he limped across the smooth grass to the edge of the pool; he threw down his pipes and trod them under his goat hoofs till they were all bruised and broken. And stealthily he crept away across the meadows.

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